ITALIA!

Issue 126 **May 2015** £4.40

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HOLIDAYS PROPERTY FOOD WINE CULTURE PEOPLE

LIVING IN TUSCANY

As popular as ever, Tuscany is still a hotbed for property purchases – join us as we explore your options

Whispers in Ferarra

A haunting visit to the ancient city

DELICIOUS SPRING RECIPES

Seasonal pasta, risotto and more!

48 HOURS IN THE VAL D'AOSTA

Spend a weekend in Italy's smallest region, breathing in fresh mountain air

The best Barbera wines tasted

MODERN DAY MILAN

Beyond the fashion!

Issue 126 May 2015 • PROPERTY IN TUSCANY • 2015 MILAN WORLD EXPO • 48 HOURS IN THE VAL D'AOSTA • SPRINGTIME RECIPES

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Homes in Tuscany, page 20

Welcome!

Tuscany has a certain appeal. It remains the most popular place to buy (or intend to buy) a property in Italy for those of us who aren't native to the country. You can understand why... The landscape is stunning; the beaches – especially those in the south of the region – are to die for; the food and wine are excellent, and it has Florence and some of the most beautiful cities and towns to entice and entrance. In this issue we revisit the property market in Tuscany (see page 20), examining just what you can get for your money and where to buy – and where not to!

Tuscany is not, of course, the be-all and end-all of Italy. And so throughout the rest of this issue we travel across the country to bring you features covering everything from the country's famous cycle race, the Giro d'Italia (page 64), through spending 48 hours in the Val d'Aosta (page 42), to a rather haunting experience taking in the ancient city of Ferrara (join Joe Gartman on page 33) .

Plus, as ever we bring you a bounty of food and wine to enjoy, even if you've no immediate plans to travel to Italy. Take time in your own kitchen to prepare a selection of seasonal Italian dishes now that spring is finally upon us; take the opportunity to prepare sardines with an Italian twist; and then relish the lesser-known wine from Piedmont... Barbera may not have the reputation of Barolo and Barbaresco, but it makes for a refreshing change to the classic heavyweights.

Paul P.

Paul Pettengale Editor

PS Italia!*'s brand new guide to Venice, the Veneto & Beyond is on sale now (£7.99). Visit* www.italytravelandlife.com/italiaguides *for details.*

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Subscribe to *Italia!* and save money on the usual price* and get the magazine delivered directly to your door every month! Turn to page 30 for more information.

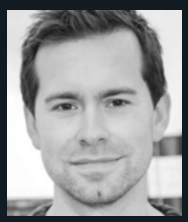
*UK orders only

AWARD WINNER! The Italian Tourist Board voted *Italia!* the 'Best Overall Publication 2011'

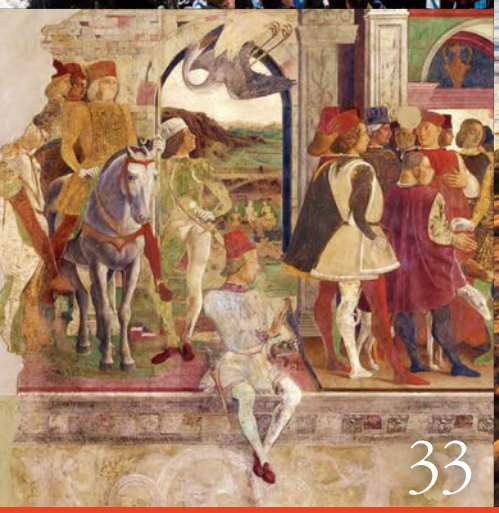
THIS MONTH'S CONTRIBUTORS

JOE GARTMAN is an American travel writer who spends a huge amount of his time in Italy. As well as writing his regular Fast Culture feature (see page 71) in this issue, he and his photographer wife have spent time visiting the city of Ferrara. You can read of his haunting experiences by turning to page 33. It's an intriguing tale.

FLEUR KINSON is our resident property expert. This month she revisits the ever-popular Tuscany to examine the state of the market. Is it going up or down? And just what will your pounds or dollars buy you? Turn to page 20 to find out. Fleur has also indulged one of her other passions in this issue with a view of the Giro d'Italia (page 64).



CHRIS ALLSOP is a keen skiier, and with the season drawing to a close, he steals a final weekend break to visit the stunning Val d'Aosta. The smallest region in Italy, it has breathtaking scenery and fine slopes... And when the snow has melted you can explore the valley on foot. Turn to page 42 to read all about Chris's journey.



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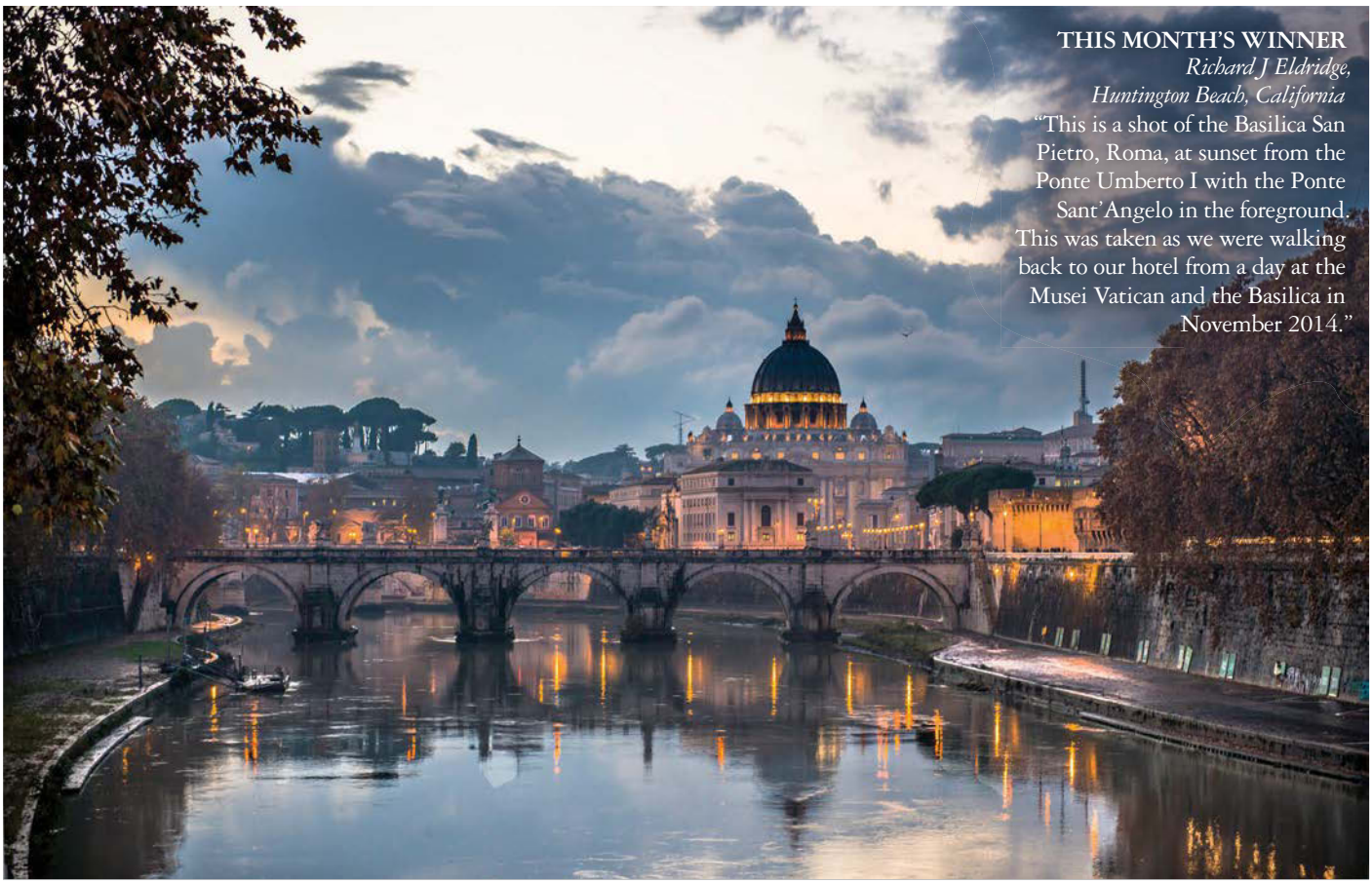
ON THE COVER

READERS' PHOTO COMPETITION!

Send us your favourite photos from your Italian travels, and each month the best photo will win a bottle of **Nino Franco Rustico Prosecco** and cooler!*

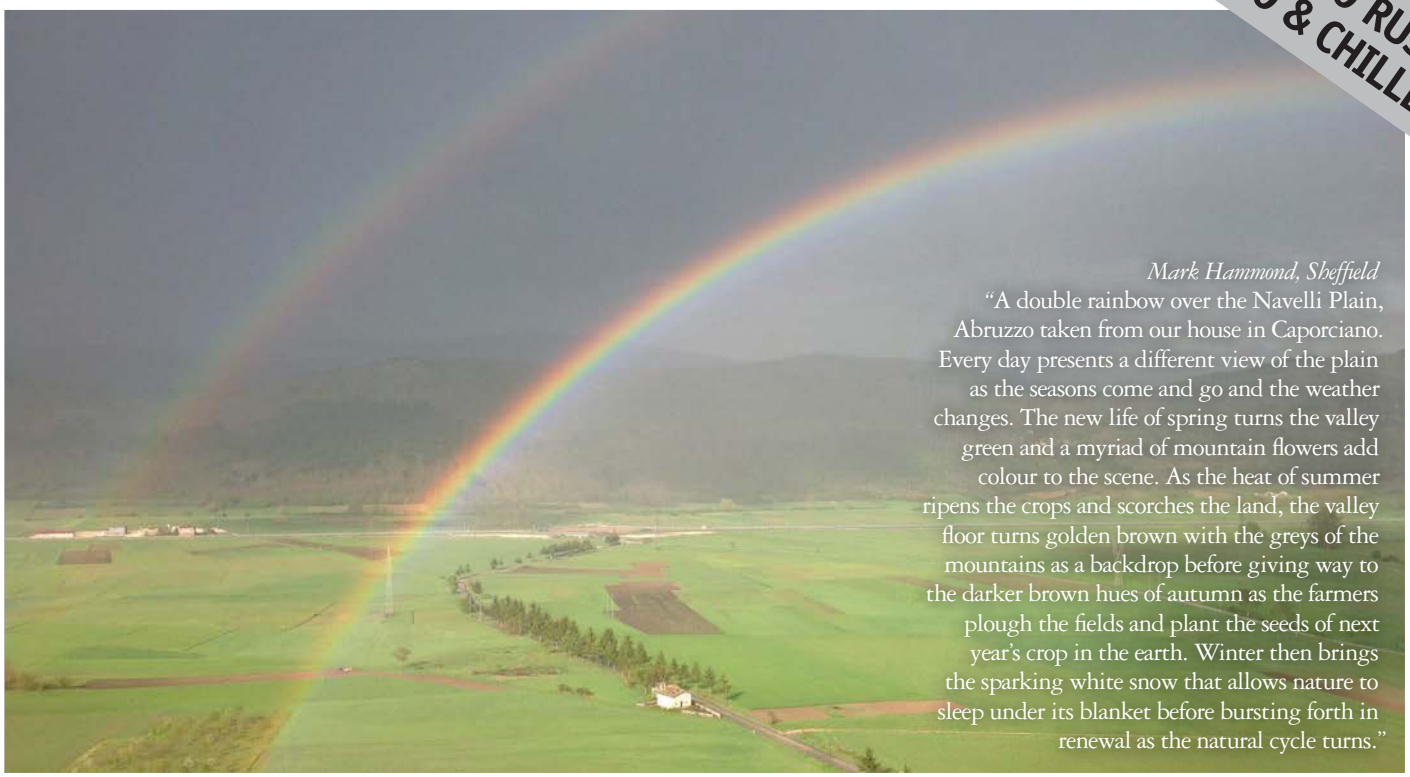


THIS MONTH'S WINNER
Richard J Eldridge, Huntington Beach, California
"This is a shot of the Basilica San Pietro, Roma, at sunset from the Ponte Umberto I with the Ponte Sant'Angelo in the foreground. This was taken as we were walking back to our hotel from a day at the Musei Vatican and the Basilica in November 2014."

Geraldine Millet, by email
"Torre del Lago, Tuscany. Taken in October last year. So peaceful. Hope you get it. Just had to share."

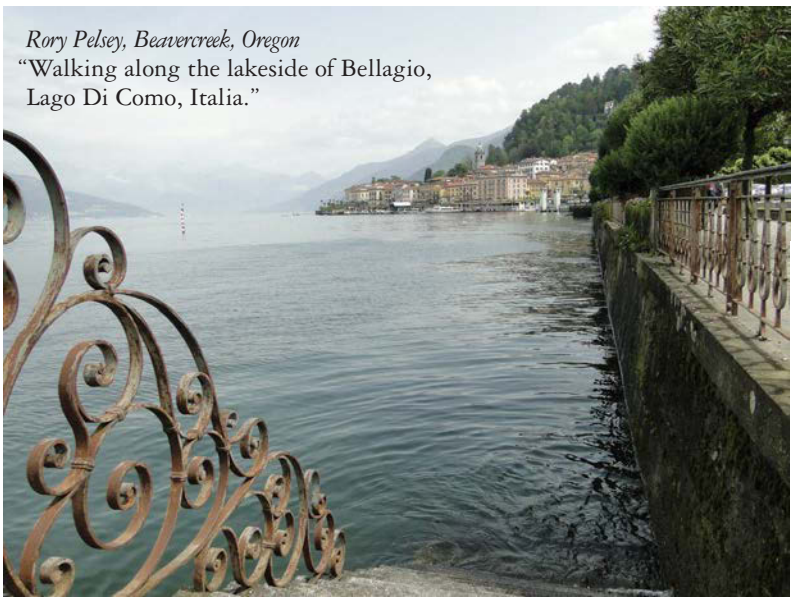
Michele Tucci, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan
"We were at the Capitolini Musems in Rome when my son said he wanted to see the statue's teeth close up!"

WIN! NINO FRANCO RUSTICO PROSECCO & CHILLER*



Mark Hammond, Sheffield
"A double rainbow over the Navelli Plain, Abruzzo taken from our house in Caporciano. Every day presents a different view of the plain as the seasons come and go and the weather changes. The new life of spring turns the valley green and a myriad of mountain flowers add colour to the scene. As the heat of summer ripens the crops and scorches the land, the valley floor turns golden brown with the greys of the mountains as a backdrop before giving way to the darker brown hues of autumn as the farmers plough the fields and plant the seeds of next year's crop in the earth. Winter then brings the sparking white snow that allows nature to sleep under its blanket before bursting forth in renewal as the natural cycle turns."

Andy Morling, by email
"I came across this scene whilst wandering the streets of Ostuni in Puglia out of season. The whitewashed buildings provided a wonderfully neutral background to the rich colours of the Ape van and the decorative window frame. Italy generally, and Puglia in particular, can be relied upon to effortlessly throw up beautifully evocative and photogenic scenes around every corner. In my view, Italy is always at its best when it's simply being itself."



Rory Pelsey, Beavercreek, Oregon
"Walking along the lakeside of Bellagio, Lago Di Como, Italia."

HOW TO ENTER Email high-resolution (300dpi) jpegs of your photos of Italy to **italia@anthem-publishing.com** or send prints to 'Reader Photo Competition' at the address given on page 18. Please include a brief explanation of your photo, plus your name, delivery address and a phone number (for our couriers). You must be over 18 to enter.

READER OFFER *Italia!* readers get a 10 per cent discount off Nino Franco wines from **www.sommelierschoice.com** until 1 June 2015 by entering the code 'italia10' at the checkout.

Please note: Any photos you submit must be your own work and you must have the right to send them for inclusion on this page. By sending your entry, you are confirming that *Italia!*'s use of your photo(s) will not constitute infringement of any rights, and confirming that you are over 18.

*Prosecco and cooler delivered to mainland UK addresses only

THIS MONTH *May 2015*

In **Italian news** this month, record snowfalls in Le Marche, record lows in childbirth across Italy, Rome's *Ben-Hur* ban and more...

FREAK BLIZZARD PUTS VILLAGERS IN DEEP TROUBLE

Never mind a white Christmas, it was a white March for the residents of Capracotta – a very white one. Indeed, the tiny village, which lies around 125 miles east of Rome, saw a staggering 100.8 inches of the white stuff in just 18 hours on 5 March – setting a new world record for snowfall in a 24-hour period. The freak blizzard left many villagers stranded, with some having to climb from second-storey widows to safety, while those lucky enough to have skis used them to travel between buildings. "It was a spectacle that took our breath away," said village mayor Antonio Monaco. "It was tough but everybody pulled together and made sure that the old people who couldn't leave their houses had the food and medicines that they needed." The record smashes the previous one, set by Silver Lake in Colorado, which saw 76 inches of snowfall in 1921.

All photography © iStock, unless otherwise stated

AUTHORITIES CRACK ITALIAN MAN'S EGG-POSTING PLOT

We've heard of people sending chocolate eggs in the post, but prehistoric eggs? That was the unlikely discovery made by customs officials at Bergamo airport, in Italy's northeast, when they intercepted a parcel bound for Los Angeles. Inside was a giant egg from a so-called "bird elephant", an emu-like creature that lived on Madagascar more than 12,000 years ago. After some investigation, the egg was found to be worth around €90,000; however, the sender – an Italian man – insisted that it had been a wedding gift and that there was nothing suspicious about his activity. "You can find eggs like this everywhere [in Madagascar] for a few euros," he was quoted as saying. "My wife collects them and her family has a few of them." Despite his protestations of innocence, he could face a fine and a prison sentence for trying to export a cultural item without permission.

SNIPPETS...SNIPPETS...SNIPPETS...SNIPPETS...SNIPPETS...SNIPPET

CCTV FOR ITALIAN CHAPEL IN ORKNEY

It's one of the most unusual sights on the Orkney Islands, but the Italian chapel – built by Italian POWs during the Second World War – is also one of the most popular. Sadly, it has also become popular with thieves in recent times, and a series of break-ins – which saw carvings and plaques stolen – has forced officials to install CCTV cameras in and around the building. On a happier note, a restoration specialist from Rome, who has carried out work on the Sistine Chapel among other famous landmarks, is set to visit Orkney to make repairs to the little church.

"WORLD'S OLDEST" ROMAN FORT DISCOVERED IN BAY OF MUGGIA

Researchers in Italy have stumbled upon what they believe to be the world's oldest known Roman fort. The historians suspected there was something beneath the land surrounding the Bay of Muggia, near Italy's border with Slovenia, but it was only when they took a closer look with special laser scanning equipment that they found tangible evidence. The fort, which is believed to have been part of a settlement spanning 32 acres, has been dated to 178BC – making it two decades older than the previous oldest fort, which is in Spain. Remarkably, it is the first Roman military camp to be discovered in Italy.

"No courtroom can give Berlusconi back his clout," commented political analyst Francesco Galietti. "That is because he is no longer seen by conservatives as the indispensable leader who can unify conservative and rightwing Italians."

Photograph © PA Photos

CAN ACQUITTED BERLUSCONI RISE YET AGAIN?

The soap opera that is Silvio Berlusconi's life continues. In March, Italy's supreme court upheld his 2014 acquittal on charges of paying for an underage prostitute and using his influence to cover it up – and now he is vowing to make a political comeback. "The decision has lifted a burden from my heart," commented Berlusconi, who is expected to campaign in upcoming regional elections. The 78-year-old was originally found guilty in 2013 of paying for sex with a 17-year-old prostitute but the verdict was overturned a year later. However, political analyst Francesco Galietti is not convinced that Berlusconi will ever restore his reputation. "No courtroom can give Berlusconi back his clout," he said. "That is because he is no longer seen by conservatives as the indispensable leader who can unify conservative and rightwing Italians."

CIRCUS BAN IS *MAXIMUS PAINUS* FOR FILM PRODUCERS AND ROME MAYOR

They were happy for The Rolling Stones to play a concert there last year, but having dozens of horses tearing up the earth at the 2,000-year-old Circus Maximus was obviously too much for Italy's culture ministry to bear. Producers of the forthcoming *Ben-Hur* remake – starring Morgan Freeman – had hoped to use the ancient site to shoot the movie's most dramatic scene, the chariot race. However, citing "technical reasons", the authorities have quashed the plan, forcing the filmmakers to relocate to a Rome studio. The mayor of the city, Ignazio Marino, lamented the decision, saying it was a missed opportunity "to give back to Rome the role of being a big international set, which is in our history and our tradition". The chariot race in the original *Ben-Hur* film, made in 1959, also used a replica of the Roman site.

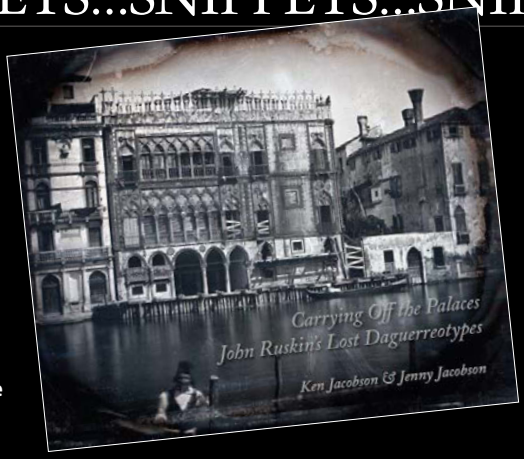
S...SNIPPETS...SNIPPETS...SNIPPETS...SNIPPETS...SNIPPETS...SNIPP

TOPLESS NUN DESCRIBED AS "OBSCENE"

If there's one thing that's likely to offend Catholic communities in Italy, it's the sight of a nun going (almost) topless. Yet somehow, that very image managed to find its way onto a billboard advertisement in Naples in March – just in time for a visit to the city by Pope Francis. The advert, which was promoting women's clothing brand Rossodisera and featured a model posing as a nun, was described by local residents as "obscene" and "ugly", though a spokesman for the company insisted that "there was no blasphemous intent". What the Pope thought about it is anyone's guess.

"LOST" PHOTOS OF VENICE

A collection of "lost" photographs of Venice by Victorian art critic John Ruskin are to feature in a new book. The 188 early daguerreotype photos were taken around 1850, while Ruskin was working on *The Stones of Venice*. Sold at auction in 2006, they will appear in *Carrying Off The Palaces: John Ruskin's Lost Daguerreotypes*, published by Bernard Quaritch. Said Ken Jacobson, who co-wrote the book with wife Jenny, "Ruskin's daguerreotypes would be a sensational new revelation in the history of photography even if he were completely unknown."



Italy's birth rate is currently the second lowest in Europe

ITALIAN BIRTH RATE AT AN ALL-TIME LOW

They say that Italian men are the world's greatest lovers, but that doesn't seem to be translating into baby-making. A new study reveals that fewer babies were born in 2014 than in any other year since the modern Italian state was formed in 1861 – compare the current figure of 8.4 births per 1,000 people to the 38.3 per 1,000 of back then. Some observers argue that the shortfall is not down to conception failure, but rather a conscious decision brought about by the poor Italian economy – quite simply, would-be parents believe they cannot afford to have children. But the Pope has poured scorn on this reasoning, describing those who choose not to reproduce as 'selfish' and part of a 'greedy generation'. Italy's birth rate is currently the second lowest in Europe, ahead only of Portugal. Azerbaijan leads the table with 18.3 births per 1,000 people.

SNOW JOKE FOR STRANDED SKIERS

A genteel afternoon on the piste turned into a nightmare for holidaymakers in the Dolomites when they became stranded on a ski lift. The incident occurred when heavy winds at the Val Gardena resort felled a large tree onto the cable of the lift, bringing the whole system to a juddering halt. Nearly 200 skiers were left dangling precariously above jagged rocks for around 90 minutes before help finally arrived. After being dropped onto the roofs of the gondolas by helicopter, the team of rescuers were able to prise open the doors, fit the skiers with harnesses and then abseil them to the ground, where ambulances awaited. While some were understandably shaken, none were seriously injured. Val Gardena, in the South Tyrol region of northern Italy, is popular with skiers and rock climbers alike, and was the venue for the FIS Alpine World Ski Championships in 1970.

ESS...STOP PRESS...STOP PRESS...STOP PRESS...STOP PRESS...STOP P

TREE DISEASE LEADS TO OLIVE OIL SLUMP

Diseased olive trees in Italy contributed to global olive oil production being down by 0.8 million tonnes this season compared to the previous year – a trend that has driven up prices. While extremely dry weather in Spain – the world's largest producer of olive oil – is likely to be the primary factor in the slump, there is serious concern about the situation in Italy, where the EU has ordered the felling of 11 million trees to combat the spread of a bacterium called xylella fastidiosa. On the plus side, production in Spain appears to be rebounding, which should see prices decrease next year.

WEBSITE CORRECTION

Regular readers of *Italia!* may remember that we recently ran a story congratulating holiday-rental company Le Marche Explorer on their 15th anniversary. Well, we obviously got a bit carried away with popping the corks and cutting the cake, because we mistyped their web address. The URL for their site is actually www.marchepropertynet.com, and if you're planning on visiting Le Marche in the near future, we strongly suggest you take a look, because it will match you up with some of the region's most beautiful and characterful properties, many of them with pools and stunning vistas. Here's to another 15 years of success!

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ITALIA!'S *Top picks*

From the kitchen to what some consider to be **the best hotel in Italy...** Our round-up of what to eat, what to wear and where to go...

HAND-CRAFTED KITCHEN WARE ➤
If your culinary skills aren't up to much, here's a tip: buy some amazing-looking kitchenware that will take your guests' minds off dinner. It's unlikely they will have seen anything from the JUST99 range – this new concept in Italian homewares, which has just launched in the UK, showcases a new object on its website every ten days, and manufactures only 99 of them, creating an instant buzz. Hand-crafted by international architects, designers and artists, they're sure to set tongues wagging. Pictured is the walnut Circlock, costing €119.

READ THIS!

▲ THEO RANDALL'S SIMPLE ITALIAN
It's a common misconception that you need to spend hours in the kitchen to conjure up a delicious meal. As Theo Randall proves in his new book, My Simple Italian (Ebury Press, £17), you can rustle up a sumptuous feast with the minimum of fuss. The award-winning chef (he runs the Italian restaurant at London's InterContinental Hotel) shows you how to make a hundred different recipes, from starters through to desserts, in your own kitchen – and some of them take as little as 15 minutes.

EAT THIS!

LEARN TO MAKE PERFECT GNOCCHI

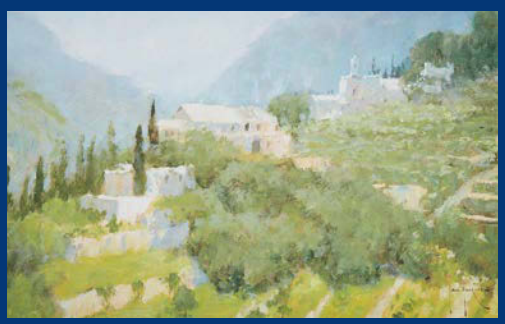
Carluccio's cooking classes, which are held in its restaurants up and down the country, are proving increasingly popular, and the new gnocchi-making classes – running throughout the spring – look like they will be well worth attending. Over a 90-minute session, you'll learn how to make the classic, Romana and spinach & ricotta types of gnocchi, and afterwards you'll be invited to enjoy the fruits of your labour over a restorative glass of wine. Gnocchi but nice! £35 per person. For venues and times, visit www.carluccios.com.

TOP 3...THIS MONTH'S TOP 3...THIS MONTH'S TOP 3...THIS MON

Top 3 Italian-themed ART

Even if you are unable to get out to Italy any time soon, you can still brighten up your home with one of these fabulous prints of **iconic Italian scenes...**

1 RURAL TUSCANY
You can almost hear the tinkle of Chianti being poured into a glass as the afternoon sun warms the back of your neck, so evocative is this delightful canvas (£95 from Laura Ashley). With its idyllic, white-washed buildings and gently sloping terraces, it's the very epitome of Tuscan countryside. And measuring a sizeable 90 x 55cm, the picture is sure to inject a healthy dose of summer into even the dreariest of days. Now then, where's our corkscrew?



WEAR THIS!

PIERO LISSONI TIC15

Most of us tell the time using our mobile phones these days, so the only reason to wear a watch is to look cool. And you can't fail to look cool in one of Piero Lissoni's new designs for Alessi. Oozing the minimalist style that characterises Lissoni's work, the 15 watches each feature a rounded square face, which he describes as "an imperfect square or a circle gone wrong". We think they look just right. store.alessi.com/gbr/en-gb

ILLESTEVA SUNGLASSES

Whether it's Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast At Tiffany's* or Tom Cruise in *Top Gun*, nothing says style icon like a good pair of sunglasses. We're big fans of Illesteva's shades, which are handmade in Italy and come in a wide range of groovy shapes and colours. For a pair that's sure to turn heads on the high street, try the Leonard II Colors Mirror glasses, which are chic, unique – and very stripy! £195 from www.illesteva.com

LISTENING TO LA DOLCE VITA

Soundtrack the spring sunshine with a collection of Italian songs that's so cool, you could serve it up in a tall glass with an umbrella. *La Dolce Vita* features Italian legends like Nino Rota (who composed the theme to *The Godfather*), Luigi Tenco and Piero Umiliani – as well as the not so Italian Marilyn Monroe, Bobby Darin (né Walden Robert Cassotto) and Brigitte Bardot. With a total of 40 tracks spread over two discs, it will help you to enjoy "the good life" for a good couple of hours at least.

GRAND HOTEL TIMEO

Stunning Italian vistas combine with awesome Greek history to make the Grand Hotel Timeo the kind of place you stay in in your dreams. This little corner of Sicily regularly features in lists of "the world's best hotels", and it's easy to see why. As you look out of your opulent suite, the majesty of Mount Etna attempts to wrestle your gaze from the impressive ancient Greek theatre that sits directly in front of you. Add a mouthwatering range of dining options and a luxury spa, and you won't want to come home. www.belmond.com/grand-hotel-timeo-taormina

STAY HERE!

THIS MONTH'S TOP 3...

2 ITALIAN GARDEN

He may have been Austrian but Gustav Klimt loved Italian gardens. His *Paesaggio con giardino italiano* does not specify the location, but we do know that Klimt painted this in the summer of 1913, a season he spent with friends at Malcesine, on Lake Garda – near enough to the famous gardens of the Albergo Morandi for us to be able to make an educated guess... (£27 from www.artrepublic.com)

3 THE RIALTO BRIDGE

The Rialto Bridge is one of the most photographed views in the world, and this shot makes it easy to see why. Shimmering in the early evening light as it watches over the Grand Canal, it's the perfect setting for lovers, as well as shoppers (it's one of only four bridges in the world to have shops on). If you can't get away to Venice any time soon, this beautifully photographed print (£69.99 from www.art.co.uk) is surely the next best thing.

EVENTS IN MAY 2015

Planning a trip to **Italy this month**? There are a wealth of weird and wonderful events to pencil into your calendar, from candle races to tree weddings, puppet birthdays to snake-charming...

FEAST OF SAINT EPHYSIUS

1 May
Cagliari

You'd be hard-pushed to find a more spectacular religious festival in the world than this annual event in Cagliari, Sardinia. Saint Ephysius saved the city from the plague in the 17th century, so it's no surprise that they honour him with verve and vigour. The celebrations are spread over four days but the biggest one is on 1 May, when a statue of Ephysius is carried through the city on a gold-plated coach drawn by oxen, to the ambient strains of Sardinian pipe music.

RISOTTO FESTIVAL

3 May
Sessame

You're sure to have a rice time (sorry, we couldn't resist!) at the Risotto Festival in the lovely Piedmont *comune* of Sessame, near Turin. This annual event, dating right back to the 13th century, sees food lovers gather together to sample varieties of the traditional Italian rice dish – a speciality of the region – along with other delicious foodie fancies, and there are market stalls and musical performances too. One thing's for sure: you won't leave with an empty stomach!

CALENDIMAGGIO

6-9 May
Assisi

The Umbrian town of Assisi is best-known as being the birthplace of Saint Francis, but back in medieval times it was also renowned for the bitter rivalries that erupted between the two local political parties. These bloody conflicts are commemorated every year at the town's popular spring festival, which brings the fascinating history to life with the help of songs, dances, period costumes and battle re-enactments. It's a spectacle that's both educational and exhilarating!

SNAKE HANDLERS PROCESSION

7 May
Cocullo

If you lived in the hill village of Cocullo, L'Aquila, in the 11th century and you suffered from ophidiophobia (a fear of snakes), you'd have been grateful for the actions of Saint Dominic. He's said to have rid the area of venomous serpents, a feat that's still celebrated to this day in the village. Hundreds gather to watch snake-charmers parade a wooden statue of Dominic, writhing with the slippery beasts, through the streets. It's certainly not for the faint-hearted!

WEDDING OF THE TREES

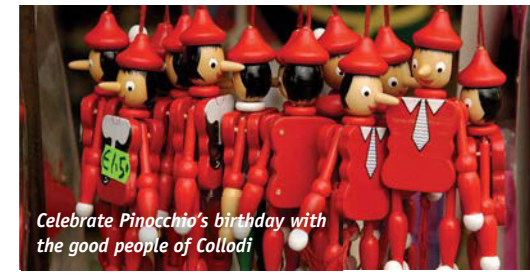
8 May
Vetralla

As the happy couple stand side by side on their big day, the gathering masses coo adoringly at the bride's floral decoration and pretty veil. But this is no ordinary matrimonial couple – it's two oak trees dressed up to celebrate the protection and care of the forests around the town of Vetralla, Viterbo. This unusual festival has been taking place since 1432 and also includes music, horsemen and a free picnic for visitors. How could you resist saying "I will"?

GIRO D'ITALIA

9-31 May
Nationwide

The Tour de France may be the most famous event on the cycling calendar, but make no mistake – the Giro d'Italia is every bit as dramatic. Running since 1909, this annual stage race sees some of the world's fittest and most focused cyclists lock horns over Italy's – and its neighbouring countries' – most spectacular routes. Colombia's Nairo Quintana triumphed in last year's event but, with so much dedication and determination on show, this year's title is anyone's to win.



Celebrate Pinocchio's birthday with the good people of Collodi

Photograph © iStock

FISH FESTIVAL OF SAINT FORTUNATO

10 May

Camogli

Every year, on the second Sunday of May, the port of Camogli on the Portofino peninsula gives thanks to Fortunato, a patron saint of fishermen. The night before the main event, a fuse on the steeple of the church is lit to ignite huge bonfires on the beach. Then, on the Sunday, the fishy fun begins in earnest, with the world's largest frying pan (spanning five metres!) cooking up fresh catches for hungry visitors – for free!

RACE OF THE CANDLES

15 May

Gubbio

The stunning medieval city of Gubbio in Umbria is the setting for one of the oldest traditions in Italy. On the eve of the feast of the city's patron saint, Ubaldo, the statues of Ubaldo, Saint George and Saint Anthony the Abbot are hoisted up on wooden pedestals – meant to represent candles – and raced through the city's streets. Singing and a torchlight procession round off what is a truly fascinating and atmospheric spectacle.

NOTO INFIORATA

15-17 May

Noto

Art and gardening come together at this colourful yet quirky annual festival in the Sicilian city of Noto. The weekend begins with a group of artists creating floral mosaics on historic street the Corrado Nicolaci. Visitors are given time to admire the works, which adhere to a different theme every year, before the town's children are let loose to run through the flowerbeds, destroying everything in their path. Percy Thrower will be turning in his grave.

FESTIVAL OF THE SEA

17 May

Venice

Venice celebrates its historic relationship with the sea at this annual extravaganza. Central to the day's proceedings is a spectacular parade of rowing boats from Saint Mark's Square to the Lido, led by the Mayor of the city and his dignitaries. After the Mayor has tossed a golden ring into the water as a symbolic gesture, the party continues on dry land, with everything from traditional live music to food and drink stalls.

PINOCCHIO'S BIRTHDAY

25 May

Collodi

Author Carlo Lorenzini loved his adopted home, the Tuscan village of Collodi, so much that he made Collodi his pen-name. The subject of his most famous work, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, is honoured with a special birthday celebration in the village every 25 May. Whether or not your kids are familiar with the puppet that comes to life, they'll fall in love with the costumed characters, live entertainment and hands-on activities.

CANTINE APERTE

30 & 31 May

Nationwide

Oenophiles really need to be in Italy for Cantine Aperte. Translating as "Open Cellars", it's the one weekend of the year when many of the country's wineries open their doors to the general public, allowing them to sample their latest produce (and in some cases, that extends to cheese and olives, too!). With over 800 wineries taking part, you'll be spoilt for choice!

Please note that the dates of all events are subject to change. If you plan to attend, check events are going ahead before you travel. All attempts are made to present the correct details.

VIEWPOINT

They have been farming the **salt flats of Sicily** since long before the Romans arrived on the island and they still are – the tourist industry here, you see, is not the most buoyant in Italy…

Few tourists venture to the far west of Sicily. Even those travellers intrepid enough to leave the north coast resort of Cefalù for a trip to Palermo, a drive to Corleone, or a bus trip to Agrigento will be unlikely to consider a journey to the far west coast, to Marsala or Trapani. The truth is that there isn't a lot to see and do here. There's no bustling city to bristle the senses, no village made famous by one of the greatest films of all time (though none of it was actually shot there), and no ancient ruins to clamber up to and over. Just a town where they make a famous fortified wine, another town with an international airport, and an expanse of flat coastal land where they mine a lot of salt. It is telling indeed that the only direct airline service from the UK to Trapani (Ryanair from Manchester) is no more. It's just been cancelled. It was in our Flight Guide (p.94) last month but this month it's not. All gone. People don't want to go and see salt flats it seems, even if they do have beautiful old windmills on them. Certainly not enough people to fill an aeroplane every week. And so now, we are sad to report, if you do want to see the historic salt production area of western Sicily, you'll have to fly to Palermo (from Dublin, Gatwick or Stansted) and hire a car there. Sorry, salt fans. Especially those of you from Manchester.

le Marche HOLIDAY

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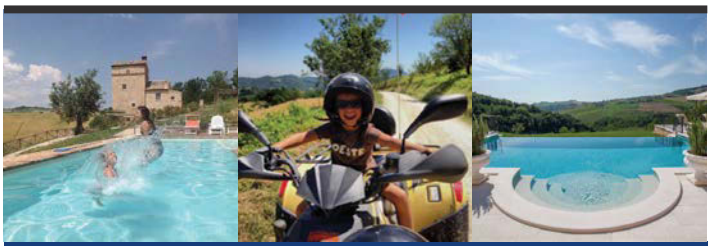

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Photograph © iStock

A career in wine can be enjoyable and rewarding for a youngster

MAN AND MACHINE

LETTER OF THE MONTH MAY 2015

Thank you for this article regarding families with children and the allure of the Eternal City.

I don't have children of my own but my neighbor's children have adopted me as their "Uncle Thomas #II" (they have a real uncle Thomas, thus the number two for me). I look forward to the day that I can introduce them to Rome, my second home.

One place I want to take them that was not in your article is the Museo Centrale Montemartini. It is part of the Capitoline system of museums but it is in an old electrical plant that has been decommissioned. The beauty of it is that the Capitoline museum had pieces that it had no room to display. For the year 2000, they moved pieces into the Montemartini space – antiquities, Greek and Roman, juxtaposed against the industrial machinery of the plant, machines that maintain their own majestic beauty.

The museum is huge and often when I go there I find children sitting on the floors drawing statues or machines or both, something that other museums do not have the space to allow. I have always drawn the antiquities. This visit the machines got their due.

Thomas J. Allsopp, Seattle, Washington

Antiquities at the Centrale Montemartini

Photograph © Wikimedia Commons/Lalupa

Our letter of the month (when based in the UK) will win a £25 voucher to spend at **www.delicibo.com**, recently launched to complement the Chesterfield-based Calabria Cucina & Delicibo Deli. **delicibo.com** provides a wide range of artisan Italian food and drink items for your enjoyment at home.

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TO TERNI AND FOLIGNO

I would like to endorse heartily Alexander Caserta's letter in the February issue. I do think you need to expand your range of subjects and there are so many possibilities. I have been a subscriber for a number of years and one becomes very conscious of the repetition. One more article on houses in Le Marche and you will probably hear my screams in Bath. Also please spare us any more photos of Castelluccio in articles about Umbria. I know it looks pretty (from a distance) but it is actually a dump, with some good restaurants, and hardly representative of the region. One suggestion is to cover towns that are often overlooked but really deserve attention. In my own patch of Umbria both Terni and, more especially, Foligno are much underrated.

Paul Langridge, Tonbridge, Kent and Collemancio, Umbria

Thank you Paul, both for being a loyal reader of the magazine and for your comments. We recently had a strategy meeting to go through our Readership Survey results. (Thanks, by the way, to everyone who made the effort to respond to that.) It was agreed that we should try to 'mix up' the features content a bit more to offer more content for seasoned travellers who want to get off the beaten track. We do, however, have to balance that with commercial realities: put Venice, Rome, the Lakes or Florence on the cover, for instance, and we simply sell more copies.

CAREERS IN THE WINE TRADE

I have just finished reading the January edition of the *Italia!* magazine and noticed you had written the article on wines. My daughter, who is learning French and Italian, is nearing school leaving age and about to enter the world of work. She has no specific career in mind yet, other than using her languages. However, she has very good senses in taste, hearing and scent. She wondered how one becomes involved in a job with wine, for example, a sommelier, or writing about wines, etc. Are you able to provide any advice?

Lisa Jordan, via email

The best way to get into a position in the wine trade (pretty well any career, for that matter) is to go work as an intern somewhere. In this instance ideally an independent wine importer/retailer where you'd be surrounded by experts from which to learn.

PLANE CONSTERNATION

My husband and I spent a fabulous fortnight touring southern Italy last year and would love to repeat it. But it is rather annoying that we have to travel down to Gatwick when we live in the Midlands and are only 60 miles from Manchester, with Birmingham and Liverpool also close by. This adds extra expense as it involves overnight stays at both ends of the holiday, and costly parking. It does seem ludicrous that you can fly around the world from Manchester, but you can't get to the south of Italy!

Rona Hayward, Whitchurch

48 HOURS IN BRESCIA

Love your magazine; have subscribed since we bought our villa on Lake Garda in 2002.

The article in the February edition on Brescia has two errors which I feel I should bring to your attention. Firstly it mentions the restaurant La Sosta being Michelin-starred, it certainly is not! It also mentions Franciacorta being produced by 'methode champenoise', I am sure you know that this should be 'methode traditionelle.'

Jeffrey Benson

Thank you Jeffrey, La Sosta is indeed not Michelin-starred. But the difference between 'champenoise' and 'traditionelle' is legal, not technical: it's about where, not how. So, you are right there too, but…!

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Homes in Tuscany

A justly famous region of perfect countryside and gem-like cities, Tuscany still melts the hearts of visitors and homebuyers. Property prices are on your side now and it's an excellent time to buy, says **Fleur Kinson**...

Tuscany occupies a special place in the popular imagination. It is not only the home of magnetic cities such as Florence, Pisa and Siena, it is also the site of legendarily gorgeous stretches of countryside. To many minds, images of Tuscany stand in as shorthand for Italy itself: Pisa's wonky tower, Michelangelo's David, rolling hills striped with vineyards, honey-coloured farmhouses guarded by sentinel-like cypress trees. Today as for the past several decades, this is a prestigious region to visit, and an even more prestigious place to own a home.

The fashion for Tuscany got going about 40 years ago, when buyers began snapping up remarkably cheap farmhouses in the lyrical hills north of Siena and converting them into chic country retreats. The rich and famous soon got wind of the region's delights and decided that central Tuscany was *the* place to enjoy sophisticated rustic relaxation. The region's fame blossomed, and so did its property prices. There have been times in recent years when central Tuscany had the world's highest-priced rural homes. And times when one in every three foreign visitors heading to Italy was heading to Tuscany.

It's been a heady ride for the region, but what's the story in Tuscany these days? Well, visitor popularity hasn't waned in the slightest. As new parts of the world gain wealth, so their citizens almost inevitably spend some of it on visiting Tuscany. It took a while for the international recession to make much of a dent in Tuscany's property prices, but it eventually did so and asking prices are now significantly lower than they were five or six years ago. Loretta Lucaroni of the agency Toscana Houses estimates that homes in town centres are now priced at 20 per cent less on average while rural farmhouses are going for 15 per cent less.

In addition to this lowering of asking prices, the Italian economy is still languishing while many other nations are recovering, which makes many Italian vendors keen to sell quickly and thus they are more open to negotiation on price. Also, as Karen Roos of the agency Casa Tuscany points out, "Take into account the weak euro, particularly against the pound, and it means that Tuscany's currently cheap property prices are even cheaper." In a nutshell, right now is a superb time to buy in Tuscany if you can.

Siena's historical centre is a UNESCO World Heritage Site

FIGURES AND PLACES

So what sort of prices are we talking about? These are rough guidelines, but in the attractive, high-altitude areas of the far north, you can find village houses starting at around €70,000 and three-bedroom country homes for as little as €120,000. Similar prices can be found in Tuscany's far south. In central Tuscany, you'd be lucky to find a farmhouse for less than €500,000, and should expect to pay €750,000 or more for these. Some Tuscan cities are ➤

Photography © iStock, unless stated

The rolling farmlands of Tuscany, these near Volterra

ROOF TERRACE CHARM

Type of property **Town centre apartment**
Number of bedrooms **2**
Price **€155,000**
Location **Torrenieri, Montalcino**
Contact **Toscana Restoration info@toscanarestoration.com**
☎ +39 338 793 5130 or +44 0754 0277 572

A perfectly restored top floor apartment with independent access in a pleasant small town near Montalcino. The property offers charm and excellent value, with two bedrooms, a sitting room kitchen, bathroom, utility room and spacious cantina/storage. The property boasts two outdoor spaces: a roof terrace with views over rooftops to rolling fields. There is also a secluded walled patio, perfect for pots of herbs and alfresco eating. Torrenieri has good shopping, transport, bars and restaurants. The perfect base to enjoy Siena (30 minutes) and the many historic Tuscan hill towns of the area. Pisa, Florence and Rome are around two hours away (and accessible by train!).

MONTALCINO BORDER

Type of property **Farmhouse with land**
Number of bedrooms **3**
Price **€415,000**
Location **San Giovanni d'Asso, Siena**
Contact **Toscana Restoration info@toscanarestoration.com**
☎ +39 338 793 5130 or +44 0754 0277 572

Classic Tuscan country living in a farmhouse on the borders of prestigious Montalcino and San Giovanni d'Asso, half an hour from Siena. Views are 360 degrees of pure Tuscan delight with rolling hills, vines, olives and cypresses. The house is liveable but offers great unexploited potential for extra accommodation (very rare in Tuscany) subject to consent. It would make an excellent B&B or other live/work possibilities with nearly 2 hectares of grounds including a small olive grove and vegetable garden. Space to create a swimming pool with great views. Good shopping and transport facilities are less than ten minutes away.

Lunigiana, in the north, has some of the region's lowest property prices

expensive too, particularly Florence, where centrally-located two-bedroom apartments start at about €200,000.

As the above suggests, Tuscany is a large place (it's the fifth largest of Italy's twenty official regions), and different parts see very different prices. So it's important to get a sense of Tuscany's internal variety – both to know what kind of area you might like most and, of course, what area might suit your particular budget. Let's take a quick tour, travelling top to bottom then swinging sideways. Tuscany's northernmost reaches are appealingly leafy and mountainous, and often lie within striking distance of very lovely bits of coastline. Over recent years, bargain-hunting foreign buyers have shown considerable interest in rural northern areas such as Lunigiana and Garfagnana. Prices up here have been among Tuscany's most affordable, and remain so.

Inching down the region, we start to meet with some of Tuscany's

Anghiari, Arezzo – Tuscan perfection at affordable prices

Prices in the mountainous north have been among the most affordable, and remain so

much-loved tourist cities. Florence is the titan of these, and a pricy spot for property. As noted earlier, two-bedroom apartments in central locations start at about €200,000.

The holiday rental prospects on such a home would be superb, however. Visitors come to Florence year-round, not just in the summertime, and there's also the possibility of renting long-term to students. Pisa isn't a great deal cheaper than Florence and a much better bet might be Lucca – a charming little city, reasonably priced and much less spoilt by tourism than either Pisa or Florence. Of other Tuscan cities, it's fair to say that bijou Siena is a costly spot, while interesting locales such as Volterra and the eastern cities Cortona and Arezzo are much more affordable. In fact, the province of Arezzo apparently has the lowest average property prices in Tuscany.

CENTRE AND SOUTH

Central Tuscany sees the classic landscapes of green and gold rolling hills striped with vineyards and punctuated with the exclamation marks of cypress trees. Rural homes in this delicious area attract the élite, who have often enjoyed élite returns on their investment when they eventually re-sell. Summer holiday rental returns on properties in central Tuscany are still excellent, and if you can afford the area, by all means go for it. Note that in the Chianti Hills area, between Siena and Florence, prices reach an apogee, with plenty of luxurious large farmhouses asking a million euros or more. This is the fabled 'Chiantishire' area that has had so many estate agents and homesellers frothing at the mouth with financial delight over the past 40 years or so. As the nickname suggests, you won't find yourself far from fellow non-Italian owners if you buy here.

Buyers of more modest means seeking a country home in Tuscany would do well to look to the region's eastern, southern and northern extremes. The under-visited far south is a comparatively empty and ➤

HISTORIC CITY LIVING

Type of property **Sensitively restored townhouse**
Number of bedrooms **3**
Price **€395,000**
Location **Montalcino, Siena**
Contact **Toscana Restoration info@toscanarestoration.com**
☎ +39 338 793 5130 or +44 0754 027 7572

An attractive old stone built townhouse in the heart of medieval Montalcino with views of the fortress from the upper windows. Restored with care and attention by craftsmen using authentic natural materials, the property offers living space on three floors with three bedrooms and three bathrooms (with travertine stone and polished marble plaster), large sitting room and family kitchen with a wood fired cooking hearth! An excellent location in the centre of all that this renowned wine town has to offer.

LA CASA DI MR VINCENT

Type of property **Rural proprety**
Number of bedrooms **3**
Price **€549,000**
Location **Garfagnana, Lucca**
Contact **Roy Santi ☎ +39 348 860 7786**
www.housesintuscany.com and www.dimoretoscane.com

Attractive rural property with pool and great visual appeal, recently renovated to a high standard, set in an unique context overlooking the Apuan mountains with breathtaking views from every window. This property is located on the outskirts of a village in the Garfagnana and is 40mins from the centre of Lucca. The house has been sympathetically restored in the traditional Tuscan style, the windows doors and kitchen have all been hand crafted. The property consists of: Lounge with open fireplace, kitchen, dining area leading through French doors onto the covered terrace, 3 bedrooms en-suite, all with French doors leading outside, boiler room, covered terrace suitable for dining, 2 open terraces suitable for dining, guest Toilet. Solar Panel, Gas central heating, Pool 10 x 5 metres. N°739.

UNFINISHED NOBLE VILLA

Type of property **Villa**
Number of bedrooms **TBA**
Price **€600,000**
Location **Garfagnana, Lucca**
Contact **Roy Santi ☎ +39 348 860 7786**
roysanti@dimoretoscane.com roy@housesintuscany.com
www.dimoretoscane.com www.housesintuscany.com

A noble palazzo, incomplete, in a panoramic location. The building is an extension of the adjacent 17th-century palazzo. Extension work started in the 18th century and came to an standstill during WW2. The property is in a good state, thanks to maintenance by the present owners. A unique opportunity to redevelop an historic palazzo of about 1,000sqm with several hectares of land. The structure could become an elegant hotel, a palatial private home or luxury residential units. The building is structurally sound. The property is on the edge of the hamlet of Garfagnana. Open to offers.

CASA GIORGINA

Type of property **Villa**
Number of bedrooms **3**
Price **€670,000**
Location **Barga**
Contact **Roy Santi ☎ +39 348 860 7786**
roysanti@dimoretoscane.com roy@housesintuscany.com
www.dimoretoscane.com www.housesintuscany.com

Splendid stone property in panoramic position, fully renovated to a high standard with gardens, balconies, terraced land and pool. 190sqm on 3 levels. Third level: 3 double bedrooms, 2 bathrooms. Second level: Steps lead from a private car park down to a terrace and the main entrance, which leads into an entrance hall. Large kitchen/dining room with terracotta tiles, original beams and contemporary wood stove. First level: Lounge, study, bathroom. This floor has arches leading onto another terrace overlooking the pool.

The sandy cove of Cala Violina Beach, Maremma

spacious area where wide, muscular hills vie with sudden upthrusts of ancient volcanic rock. Vineyards, olive groves and hilltop medieval villages complete the enchantment. Note that the far south gives you easy access to the considerable delights of Lake Bolsena over the border in Lazio, while the extreme east puts you within range of lovely Lake Trasimeno in Umbria.

Speaking of water, what of the coast? Tuscany's seaside roughly divides into two halves, with the northern part being populous and well-developed and the southern stretches growing increasingly wild and elemental. The old marshes of the extreme south's Maremma are historically guarded against much coastal development, and today this area is appealingly unspoilt and unadorned. Tuscany's northern coast – and all the region's islands – are generally very expensive places for property, while the southern part is cheap by comparison. Note that Italian buyers like to be as close to the water as possible, and you can always make savings by buying a few miles inland.

Coastal Maremma in Tuscany's extreme south is appealingly unspoilt and unadorned

RESTORATION COMEDY

When foreign buyers first started falling in love with Tuscany, an abundance of cheap old farmhouses was one of the region's big attractions. Such properties were inexpensive and so was the building work required to transform them into bespoke, luxurious homes. Of course neither the tumbledown properties nor the building work comes cheap anymore, but like much else in Tuscany right now, they are both cheaper than they were five or six years ago. So if restoring an old Tuscan home is your dream, you need not dismiss it as a pipe dream.

The restoration section of the market is still in flux, as many buyers can't decide whether or not to take a financial risk on restoration in current economic conditions at home and abroad. Consider your options and look hard for the right kind of property for you. There are pros and cons to buying an old place that someone else has already restored, to buying a home that needs only a little work, and to buying an old ruin that needs full restoration. Much of the value of each option lies in your personal taste. Do you want to be able to use the property immediately? If so, choose ready-restored. Do you want to imprint your taste on the place but without serious building work? Choose a habitable home needing minor fixes. Do you want the immense satisfaction of shaping a home exactly to your taste and bringing a tumbledown wreck ➤

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TUSCANY REGIONAL GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

Tuscany remains the most popular of Italian regions and is loved by tourists and would-be property buyers for many reasons, not least because of its beautiful, lyrical countryside and cities laden with Renaissance treasures and historic monuments. But while property prices remain high, the allure does not wane, and enthusiastic Italophiles still flock to the idyllic region. The good news is that appealing properties can still be found in abundance and as Tuscany is a large region, the patient and persistent will find some hidden nuggets that don't have to cost an arm and a leg. Here we highlight the main areas and some more off-the-beaten track locations.

NORTHERN TUSCANY

❶ Liguria borders the head of this part of Tuscany, while Emilia-Romagna sits at its back. The two dominant areas are the coast and the mountains – the Apuan Alps and the Apennines. If you want to explore the seaside resorts, you should pay a visit to Forte dei Marmi, with its imposing fortress, and Viareggio, the heart of the northern Tuscan Riviera. Move inland to Abetone north of Pistoia for good skiing. Two important valleys cut a swathe through the area's mighty chestnut forests: the Garfagnana north of Lucca and the Mugello above Florence. Marble is still quarried at Massa and Carrara near the coast, as used by the maestro Michelangelo for his sculptures, all those centuries ago. Further south is Lucca, a treasure trove of monuments such as 16th-century ramparts and remnants of the Romans in the via Fillungo and the old Forum. Travel east to Montecatini and its thermal waters, and medieval Pistoia, lush with attractive flower and tree nurseries.

FLORENCE

❷ What can be said about Florence, birthplace of the Renaissance and regional capital of Tuscany? Magnificent, peerless, breathtaking would be just a few words you could use of this city laden with art treasures and cultural monuments. In the 19th century the city was

awash with Italophiles indulging in the 'Grand Tour', and the influx has never abated. As a result, the city can become very crowded, but the Florentine hills are close by, where merchants in medieval times used to retire to in the heat of the summer. Humidity can be high in the summer, and fog dense in the winter, as the Arno River runs through the city's centre, and the mountains are close by, so winter, early spring and late autumn are some of the best times of the year to visit and pay homage to the manifold delights on display.

EAST TUSCANY

❸ In the densely wooded northeast above Arezzo, the scenic Casentino Valley continues up to Poppi and Bibbiena, the countryside dotted with medieval fortifications and three religious sites of note: Vallombrosa, Camaldoli and La Verna. At Arezzo visitors can enjoy a memorable yearly procession and 'Joust of the Saracens', or the monthly antiques fair, and on the Umbrian border is Sansepolcro, home town of early Renaissance painter Piero della Francesca. Off the culture trail, the busy roads of the Arno Valley will take you to a host of designer outlets for a big shopping experience. Further south, Cortona enjoys a rush of tourists at its annual summer Tuscan Sun Festival, while atmospheric Chiusi, amid more gentle rolling countryside, offers its Etruscan past as a cultural draw.

WEST TUSCANY

❹ Tuscany's long western coastline stretches from Pisa, with its naval history, Romanesque architecture and iconic monuments, to the other side of the stunning Parco Naturale della Maremma in the south. Along the coast in between are numerous picturesque fishing villages such as San Vincenzo and the more upmarket Castiglione della Pescaia, with its medieval fortress and views of the idyllic isle of Elba. There are less fragrant watering holes too, but these are more than overshadowed by the other sights of the area, which offer much contrast. The area is steeped in Etruscan lore, for example at Roselle, north of Grosseto. This ancient site went through unhappy times when it sank to become a malarial swamp overrun by cattle rustlers. But after the swamp was drained in the 1930s, the perimeter wall was revealed, and other special ruins, so better times and prosperity returned to the area. A little further north is Bolgheri, a pretty village that is approached through a five-kilometre avenue of 200-year-old cypresses, and the 'Super Tuscan' wine Sassicaia is made there. A great appeal of Tuscany and this area in particular is the native vegetation – Mediterranean scrub and roads lined with elegant umbrella pines that are endlessly appealing to visitors. Move a little inland and you'll find Volterra and Massa Marittima, both with great architectural gems to enjoy. And don't forget the famous leaning tower, a landmark of Pisa that is known across the world.

SIENA AND THE SOUTH

❺ Historic Siena is one of Tuscany's and Italy's biggest attractions, with its cuisine, museums and medieval architecture. It is a town passionately attached to its identity and has its own unique traditions, such as the biannual Palio horse race. To the south the three important zones are the Val d'Orcia, Monte Amiata and the 'deep south'. Move nearer to the Lazio border and villages like Pitigliano, Sovana and Saturnia nestle amid the wooded hills, while the mountain pastures of Monte Amiata are alive with flowers in spring. Winter skiing around Piancastagnaio and Arcidosso is good, and Castel del Piano, Abbadia San Salvatore and Santa Fiora all offer historic medieval centres. Travel south towards the Val d'Orcia and vineyards, olive groves, woodland and lush fields create a mesmerising patchwork, and delightful villages include Montepulciano and Montalcino.

Property in Tuscany is as popular as ever with a raft of options to cover many different price points

VAL D'ORCIA

Type of property **Country house**
Number of bedrooms **3**
Price **€1,400,000**
Location **Val d'Orcia, San Casciano dei Bagni**
Contact **homesitalia@yahoo.co.uk homesitalia.co.uk**

This beautiful property, in the heart of Val d'Orcia near the town of San Casciano dei Bagni, has fantastic panoramic views of the surrounding countryside, and comes with a large fenced garden and swimming pool. It is being used as a successful holiday let for international clients by the present owners, but would also make an excellent permanent home. The ground floor is made up of a large living room, a double bedroom with bathroom, a large kitchen, staff accommodation and a toilet. The first floor consists of a two double bedrooms, one with a balcony and each with ensuite bathrooms, a staff kitchen, a terrace.

SCANSANO

Type of property **Town house**
Number of bedrooms **2**
Price **€210,000**
Location **Scansano**
Contact **homesitalia@yahoo.co.uk homesitalia.co.uk**

Great opportunity to own a characteristic three-storey stone house in the historic centre of picturesque Scansano, just off the main square. The property has two bedrooms, a large living area and kitchen with the back door leading onto a terrace, an feature fireplace with wood burning stove, a bathroom and a cellar which is accessible both from inside and from the garden and has been completely renovated, leaving the original exposed beams, to make extra living space. The pretty garden is accessed from the terrace and is partially paved.

Property prices in Pisa are comparable with those of Florence

back from the dead? Choose a full restoration project.

Often you can find a better bargain in a home that's already been restored by a previous foreign buyer. Karen Roos of Casa Tuscany notes that, "There are a lot of properties on the market which people have restored already and they now need to sell, so unfortunately they may be losing money but you can find good deals – homes which are ready to go, often furnished, and can be rented out immediately, thus earning an income from day one." Meanwhile, Loretta Lucaroni of Toscana Houses notes the advantages of doing a full restoration project on an old ruin. "There are some magnificent old houses with fascinating history in spectacular locations," she says, "and they offer great investment potential. Many would-be buyers are discouraged by the thought of major restoration works, but there are many specialised agencies such as ours which can recommend builders, help with bureaucracy and offer a thorough property management service. Restoring can give you a more energy-efficient home with more state-of-the-art facilities than a property you buy ready-restored, plus, you can make the final result highly attractive to rental clients."

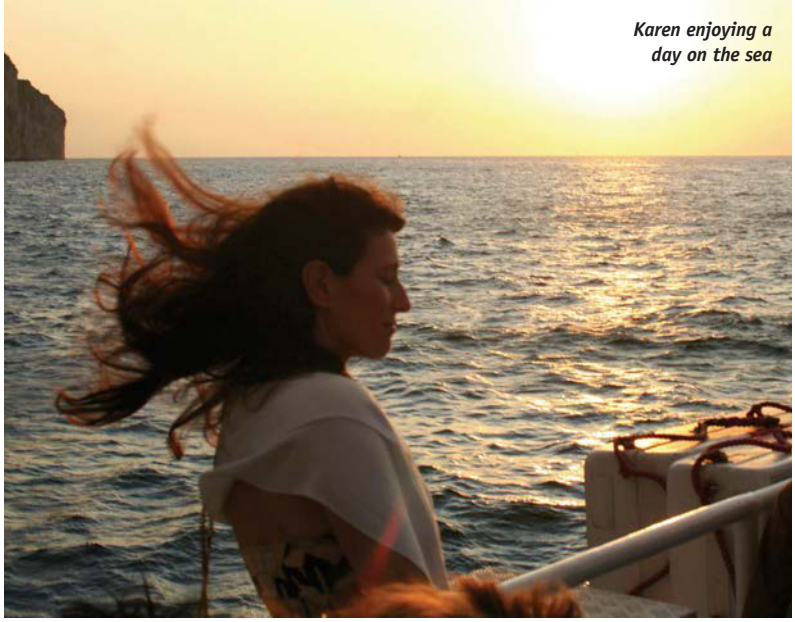
Benito Casci of the agency Houses in Tuscany cautions that, "Main structural restoration can be an exciting challenge but it is costly and I wouldn't recommend it as a short-term investment unless the property is in a prime position." However, Benito does note that older properties needing extensive renovation are among the homes falling fastest in price at the moment, so there can be savings to made on the initial purchase. Generally, however, he believes that, "Older properties that have been renovated or only need minor improvements are normally the best value for money right now."

If Tuscany is your dream region (and to many it is) then go make that dream happen

The choice, as always, is yours! If Tuscany is your dream region (and to many it is), then go make that dream happen. Tuscany hasn't been this affordable for a very long time. ■

USEFUL CONTACTS

www.casatuscany.com
www.dimoretoscane.com
www.homesitalia.co.uk
www.housesintuscany.net
www.toscanahouses.com
www.toscanarestoration.com



Karen enjoying a day on the sea

MY LIFE IN TUSCANY

Karen Metterling and her husband Jeremy own a two-bedroom country house not far from Grosseto in southern Tuscany. They enjoy five or six visits there every year, and make the place available for family and friends.

What drew them to Italy, and to southern Tuscany in particular? "Italy came as a surprise," Karen explains. "Jeremy and I had done lots of travelling in France and we thought that was our favourite country. But then my sister Maddy invited us on a joint holiday to Tuscany one year and we suddenly realised 'Oooh! This is a rather wonderful bit of the world, isn't it?!' and after a few more holidays to different parts of Italy we decided to buy a small house here.

"We bought in 2013, and apparently that was a good time to buy because prices were down due to the recession. Also, southern Tuscany was much less expensive than some other parts of the region, so I think we did pretty well for our money. The house was habitable when we bought it, but the décor inside was almost comically horrible and we did a thorough refurbishment. We wouldn't have wanted to do any more serious work than that. I know some people like to buy up these old ruined farmhouses and re-build them, but we knew that that wasn't for us.

"We did toy with the idea of putting in a pool, but we have the coast a few miles from us in one direction and Lake Bolsena a few miles in the other, so it seemed a bit unnecessary to dig a big hole in our land and fill it with water! Jeremy and I both love the sea, and we spend a lot of time on the Monte Argentario peninsula, which is quite swanky and full of yachty people but also very peaceful and unspoilt. The beaches are lovely and we like to explore the quiet pinewoods.

"We feel incredibly lucky to have a house in Tuscany, and it still sounds wonderful whenever we say 'our house in Tuscany'! But I think not many people realise that not all of Tuscany is expensive or full of rich foreign owners. Down where we are, there are some fellow Brits who have bought houses, but mostly we're surrounded by local Italians. They've all been hugely friendly and welcoming. Which is one of the things we most love about Italy. The friendliness of the people.

"It's lovely being able to let friends and family use the house too. My sister lost her husband to cancer not long ago, and being able to give her and her children a holiday whenever they want one feels like a real blessing. We love our house, and we love that it can make other people happy too."

APPARTMENT IN BARGA

Type of property **Studio flat**
Number of bedrooms **4**
Price **€140,000**
Location **Barga**
Contact **Benito Casci ☎ +39 347 368 1090**
info@housesintuscany.net

With its tranquil, fragrant garden and charming original features, the studio is a hidden gem providing a peaceful oasis in the heart of the historic centre of this lovely medieval hilltop town. Ideal holiday home for a couple. Low maintenance costs. Great investment potential and excellent rental income. Situated within the medieval walls of the well-known historic town of Barga, northern Tuscany, this unique studio apartment forms part of a former Medici palace dating back to the 16th century. A former wine cellar and latterly artist's studio, the property has been sympathetically restored by skilled local artisans and features ancient beamed chestnut ceilings and terracotta floors.

CAPANNA DEL PASTORE

Type of property **Holiday home (also for sale)**
Number of bedrooms **4**
Price **from €1,200 per week; sale €590,000**
Location **Castelnuovo di Garfagnana**
Contact **Benito Casci ☎ +39 347 368 1090**
info@housesintuscany.net

Newly restored, 4 bedroom, 5 bathroom property with private pool, situated in Castelnuovo di Garfagnana, Lucca, an area famous for its walking, wildlife and fauna. This spacious stone barn has been restored to a very high standard, with all modern conveniences, such as a well equipped kitchen; beautiful shower rooms yet it retains some of the traditional features including chestnut beamed ceilings. The house whilst very traditional has large windows creating a sense of light and airiness not always found in older style properties.

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Whispers in Ferrara

Joe Gartman reveals the ghosts of the past in a city where long-gone rulers and clergymen left unfinished business...

Ghosts don't exist, I am inclined to believe, but the atmosphere of Ferrara is distinctly eerie. Maybe it's the mist floating in from the Po Delta, to east of the city, where the great river meanders and splits and empties, multi-mouthed, into the Adriatic Sea. Maybe it's the dark and gloomy streets of the medieval section around Via Volte, or maybe it's the dungeons of Castello Estense, with their heavy iron doors and walls filled with despairing graffiti.

Don't get me wrong. I like the town very much, especially when the sun shines; and in fairness I must mention the excellent example of town planning called the "Herculean addition" that added many grand *palazzi* in Renaissance style back in the 15th century. (The name is not in honour of the mythical strongman but the city's ruler at the time, Ercole I d'Este. But I'm sure Ercole himself was named after the big guy with the club and lion's pelt.)

Since there are no hills to negotiate everybody, including great-grandma, rides a bike; and for the same reason, Ferrara is a great walking city, as long as your hearing is acute enough to pick up the whisper of bike tires approaching from behind. It would be embarrassing to be flattened by a granny in a hurry. If you're the imaginative sort, you might also hear the whisper of a disembodied voice from the past; because memories of unforgettable characters lurk, ghost-like, around every corner in Ferrara.

Our B&B on Via Scandiana, for example, is just a hundred yards or so from Palazzo Schifanoia, one of the *delizie* – suburban getaways – of the Este family, who ruled Ferrara from the 12th century until it was absorbed into the Papal States in 1597. It's a good neighbourhood for memories, even if it has deteriorated a little since the days when the royals hung out down the street. We found a friendly bar at the corner, owned by a kindly lady who gave us careful directions to the nearest laundromat (way across town) and then offered to take us there in her car. The regular patrons listened in, added their recommendations, gulped their *caffè* quickly at the counter and then adjourned to the sidewalk outside to smoke and gossip.

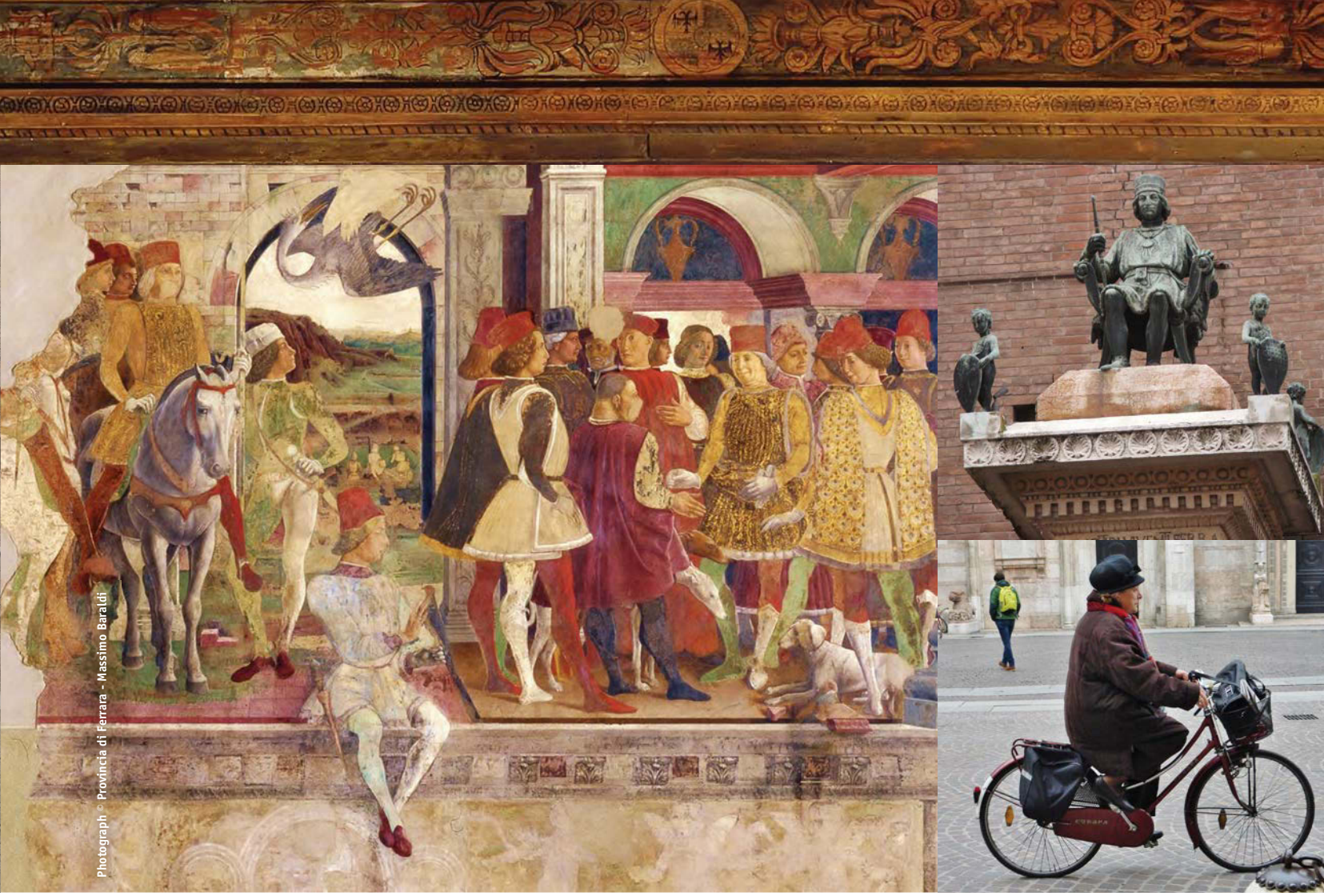
THE GOOD DUKE BORSO

We decided to postpone washday and visit Schifanoia instead. The palazzo's name derives from *schivare la noia* – "avoid boredom". No doubt there was a lot of bureaucratic tedium back at the castle. In those days, around 1385, the area was green and wooded, giving the family enough privacy to throw a proper party now and then. Later, around 1470, the little getaway was expanded under Duke Borso d'Este. He wanted a suitably impressive hall upstairs where he could entertain visiting VIPs, like Pope Paul II, who crowned Borso Duke of Ferrara in 1471.

This hall is now known as the *Salone dei Mesi* (Hall of the Months)

Clockwise from top left: The bicycle is the preferred means of city transport for most locals; fresco in Palazzo Schifanoia; the Good Duke Borso; yes, everyone cycles in Ferrara

Photography © Pat Gartman unless stated



for the fresco cycle it contains. It's an impressively spacious room, empty now except for a couple of benches for contemplation or massaging your feet. Once, all twelve months were represented on the four walls, but half of them are either gone completely, or too faint to enjoy. It seems that later owners of the building plastered them over! Happily, the remaining pictures are in reasonably good shape considering they're well over 500 years old.

The decorative scheme is based on zodiacal signs and pagan figures of each month's protective god. April, for example, honours Venus, who is shown arriving in a sumptuous river barge drawn by swans, while a large family of rabbits (of course) frisk on the bank.

Below these fanciful allegories, Borso's artists, Cosmé Tura, Francesco del Cossa and others, have created wonderful scenes of Renaissance life in Ferrara, all depicting activities appropriate to the current month. The Ferrarese painters gloried in colour, and the lively scenes of lovers and merchants and musicians disporting themselves among detailed Renaissance architecture, and gardens filled with flowers, are still splendid; but what they must have looked like when new! The frescoes are cheerful and full of life: women gowned in gorgeous fabrics, men in their parti-coloured hose and doublets, painted with dazzling skill.

Clearly the pictures extol the benefits of good government, and to drive the message home, Borso figures in each of the scenes, looking benevolent, handing out small change, or just checking to make sure everyone's having a good time. He is painted each time with the same expression, a kind of avuncular half-smile, looking just a little bit goofy with it. Come to think of it, his statue outside city hall is the same. It's a look that seems to say, "Hey, don't worry, it's just me, kindly old Uncle Borso. Don't believe all those rumours about dungeons in the castle. It's only a root cellar."

WHERE TO STAY

➤ B&B DELIZIE ESTENSE
Via Scandiana, 5
☎ +39 335 752 0153
www.deliziaestense.com
Small apartments with kitchen corners. Great location near Palazzo Schifanoia, Casa Romei, Santa Maria in Vado, Palazzina Marfisa d'Este, and Corpus Domini Convent. Free loaner bicycles. Rooms from €80.

➤ HOTEL DE PRATI
Via Padiglioni, 5
☎ +39 0532 241905
www.hoteldeprati.com
Convenient for the Estense Castle, the Diamond Palace and the City Theatre, Rooms from €90.

➤ HOTEL ANNUNZIATA
Piazza Repubblica, 5
☎ +39 0532 201111
www.annuziata.it
Modern, stylish and extremely well-maintained hotel, right next to Castello Estense. Helpful, very professional staff. Outstanding, varied buffet breakfast. Guests can borrow bikes here, too! Rooms from €120 to €150.

THINGS TO SEE AND DO

CATTEDRALE DI FERRARA
Piazza della Cattedrale
☎ **+39 0532 207449**
Hours: 7:30am-12:00pm and 4:00pm-6:30pm, except Sundays and holidays – 7:30am-12:30pm and 3:30pm-7:30pm

MUSEO DELLA CATTEDRALE
Via San Romano, 1
☎ **+39 0532 244949**
Hours: 9:30am-1:00pm and 3:00pm-6:00pm. Closed Mondays.

MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICO NAZIONALE DI FERRARA
Via XX Settembre, 122
☎ **+39 0532 66299**
Hours: Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Sunday 9:30am-5:00pm; Friday and Saturday 9:30am-7:00pm. Closed Mondays.

CASA DI LUDOVICO ARIOSTO
Via Ludovico Ariosto, 67
☎ **+39 0532 244949**
Hours: Tuesday to Sunday 10:00am-12:30pm and 4:00pm-6:00pm. Closed Mondays.

TEATRO COMUNALE DI FERRARA
Corso Martiri della Liberta, 5
☎ **+39 0532 202675**
www.teatrocomunaleferrara.it
Opera season: February to May. Check website for opera dates, and for dance and other performances.

CITY WALLS
There are nine kilometres of walls encircling the historical centre of Ferrara. You can bike or walk the park-like route on the embankments or below the walls.

VIA DELLE VOLTE AND OLDEST MEDIEVAL STREETS
Via delle Volte is named for the vaulted arches linking buildings on each side of the street. Other atmospheric streets of the era are Via Giuoco del Pallone, Via Carlo Mayr, Via Belfiore and Via Coperta.

GETTING THERE

➤ BY PLANE
The nearest airport is Bologna. There is a 'Bus & Fly' transfer service to and from Ferrara – 60 minutes. Trains from Bologna Centrale to Ferrara take 30-45 minutes. The driving distance from Bologna to Ferrara is 52 km.

➤ BY TRAIN
There are direct trains to and from Rome, Florence, Venice, and Naples, among others. The main station is not far from the Castello, and city buses depart from just outside the station entrance.

Perhaps he was telling the truth. He was known as "Good Duke Borso" after his death. Some of his artists, though, complained that he was a slow payer.

GENII LOCORUM – THE SPIRITS OF PLACES

Across the street from the bar is the church of Santa Maria in Vado, site of a miracle in March, 1171, when, during Mass, blood spurted from the host so prodigiously that it stained the vault above the altar. You can visit and perhaps see the miraculous stain, although, like many buildings in Ferrara, the church was badly damaged during the 2012 earthquakes and may be closed.

There are a couple of other aristocratic buildings in our neighbourhood, including a small *palazzina* that belonged to Marfisa d'Este, who inherited it from her father, Francesco d'Este. She refused to leave when the Este family fell from power, and apparently lived there untroubled until her death. It contains paintings and furniture from the 16th century, and has a pleasant garden to enjoy, complete with a frescoed *loggia*.

Just around the corner is a beautiful and well-preserved Renaissance palace, the Casa Romei, with elegant loggias surrounding the cortile, a frescoed "Room of the Sibyls", and a grand terracotta fireplace. It was the home of Giovanni Romei, a local aristocrat, who willed it to the nuns of Corpus Domini. Later, Cardinal Ippolito II d'Este had it renovated so that part of it would serve as his private apartments. (If you have ever enjoyed the fountains of Villa d'Este in Tivoli, you have already visited another of Ippolito's residences.)

THE PERILS OF LUCREZIA

Ippolito was a son of Lucrezia Borgia, born when she was Duchess of Ferrara and wife of Alfonso I d'Este. Of all the ghosts in Ferrara, she's the shade I'd most like to interview. Was she really a deadly femme fatale

Clockwise from top left: Pleasant gardens at the Palazzina Marfisa d'Este; the city's medieval origins are still very much in evidence; the Renaissance palazzo of Casa Romei; vase in the Archeological Museum; Via Mazzini, where cyclists and pedestrians happily share the road; portico in the Palazzina Marfisa d'Este

or merely the victim of her father's unscrupulous machinations and the mudslinging of his enemies? Her father was Pope Alexander VI, Rodrigo Borgia. (Alexander had four children, including the notorious Cesare Borgia, by his mistress Vanozza dei Cattanei. The Pope acknowledged them openly. There was no fol-de-rol about "nieces and nephews" for Rodrigo.)

Lucrezia was married three times, each match arranged by her father to suit his political and familial ambitions. When the first two marriages ceased to be useful to him, they were ended by rather unusual means: the first, to Giovanni Sforza, was annulled when Giovanni "confessed", under pressure, to impotence; the second ended when her young husband, Alfonso of Aragon, was strangled to death, probably by Lucrezia's ruthless brother Cesare.

Lucrezia was the focus of a maelstrom of gossip and rumour: was she pregnant when her first marriage was annulled? Was there a child? Who was the father? Why did two servants from the Borgia household drown in the Tiber? Was it true that Lucrezia had improper relations with Cesare, or even Alexander himself? Did she really wear a ring full of poison, and empty it into the soup of the day when necessary?

Her third marriage, to Duke Alfonso I d'Este, took her out of the Roman spotlight and brought her to Ferrara. Here, as Duchess, she was popular and respected. Even so, there were still rumours. The Duke had a roving eye, and perhaps Lucrezia returned the favour. She and Francesco II Gonzaga, ruler of Mantua, may have had an affair. Francesco was the husband of Isabella d'Este, Alfonso's sister. She also exchanged passionate letters with the poet and Cardinal, Pietro Bembo, and was an ardent pen-pal of the poet Ariosto. Still, she and Duke Alfonso had seven or perhaps eight children, although only four survived to adulthood. Lucrezia died from complications of childbirth at the age of 39.

Duke Alfonso was a chap who evidently liked to take chances. Besides marrying a girl who had a bad reputation in the kitchen, he also got on the wrong side of Pope Julius II by supporting France and Spain against the Papal territorial claims. Julius excommunicated him in 1509. However, Alfonso was a great patron of the arts, both literary and visual, attracting poets like Bembo and Ariosto, and commissioning paintings from Giovanni Bellini and Titian. He also outlived Julius.

Lucrezia and Alfonso's grandson, the later Duke Alfonso II, is thought to be the subject of Robert Browning's poem *My Last Duchess*, about a nobleman who murders his young wife. Alfonso II's first wife died at 17, either from tuberculosis or, it was strongly suspected at the time, poison.

There are, of course, several places in Ferrara where you might hope to encounter the spectres of

THINGS TO SEE AND DO

CASTELLO ESTENSE
Largo Castello, 1
☎ **+39 0532 299233**
www.castelloestense.it
Opening hours vary by season – check website.

PALAZZO SCHIFANOIA
Via Scandiana, 23
☎ **+ 39 0532 244949**
Hours: 9:30am-6:00pm. Closed Mondays.

PINACOTECA NAZIONALE DI FERRARA
Palazzo dei Diamanti, Corso Ercole I d'Este, 21
☎ **+39 0532 205844**
Hours: Tuesday to Friday 9:00am-2:00pm; Saturday and Sunday 10:00am-6:00pm. Closed Mondays.

CHIESA & MONASTERO CORPUS DOMINI
Via Pergolato, 4
☎ **+39 0532 207825**
Hours: Monday to Friday 3:30pm-5:30pm. Closed Saturday and Sunday. Ring the bell at the Convent door. You'll probably get a present as you leave – the kind of small breads that St Catherine de'Vigri used to bake. A donation is appreciated.

CASA ROMEI
Via Savonarola, 30
☎ **+39 0532 234130**
Hours: Monday to Wednesday 8:30am-2:00pm; Thursday to Saturday 2:00pm-7:30pm. Closed Sundays.

CHIESA DI SANTA MARIA IN VADO
Via Borgovado, 3
☎ **+39 0532 65127**
Call before going. The church was damaged in the 2012 earthquakes and is still being repaired as funding is available. Open irregularly when structural work allows.

PALAZZINA MARFISA D'ESTE
Corso Giovecca, 170
☎ **+39 0532 244949**
Hours: Tuesday to Sunday 9:30am-1:00pm and 3:00pm-6:00pm. Closed Mondays.

INFORMATION

➤ **The Main Tourist Information Office is in the courtyard of Castello Estense.**
☎ **+39 0532 209370**
www.ferrarainfo.com. Hours: Weekdays and holidays 9:00am-6:00pm

➤ **www.ferraraterraeacqua.it has details on most tourist attractions.**

➤ **A list of bike rental agencies can be found at: www.ferraraterraeacqua.it/en/travel/getting-around**

both Lucrezia and Alfonso. One is the Castello Estense, still sitting massively in its moat, in the centre of town. It's been there since 1385, and seems impregnable. But it, too, was damaged in the earthquakes of 2012. Nowadays its perimeter is guarded, not by the Duke's soldiers, but by a fellow in a rowboat who patrols the moat picking up floating candy wrappers. The dungeons are still there, however. You can visit them if you like. Don't let that door slam shut behind you!

The cells were sometimes occupied by family – Duke Alfonso shut two of his brothers, Ferrante and Giulio, in the castle's tower, Torre dei Leoni, for plotting against him. Ferrante died in his cell after 34 years, but Giulio was released by a later Duke after 53 years in the tower.

VOWS OF SILENCE

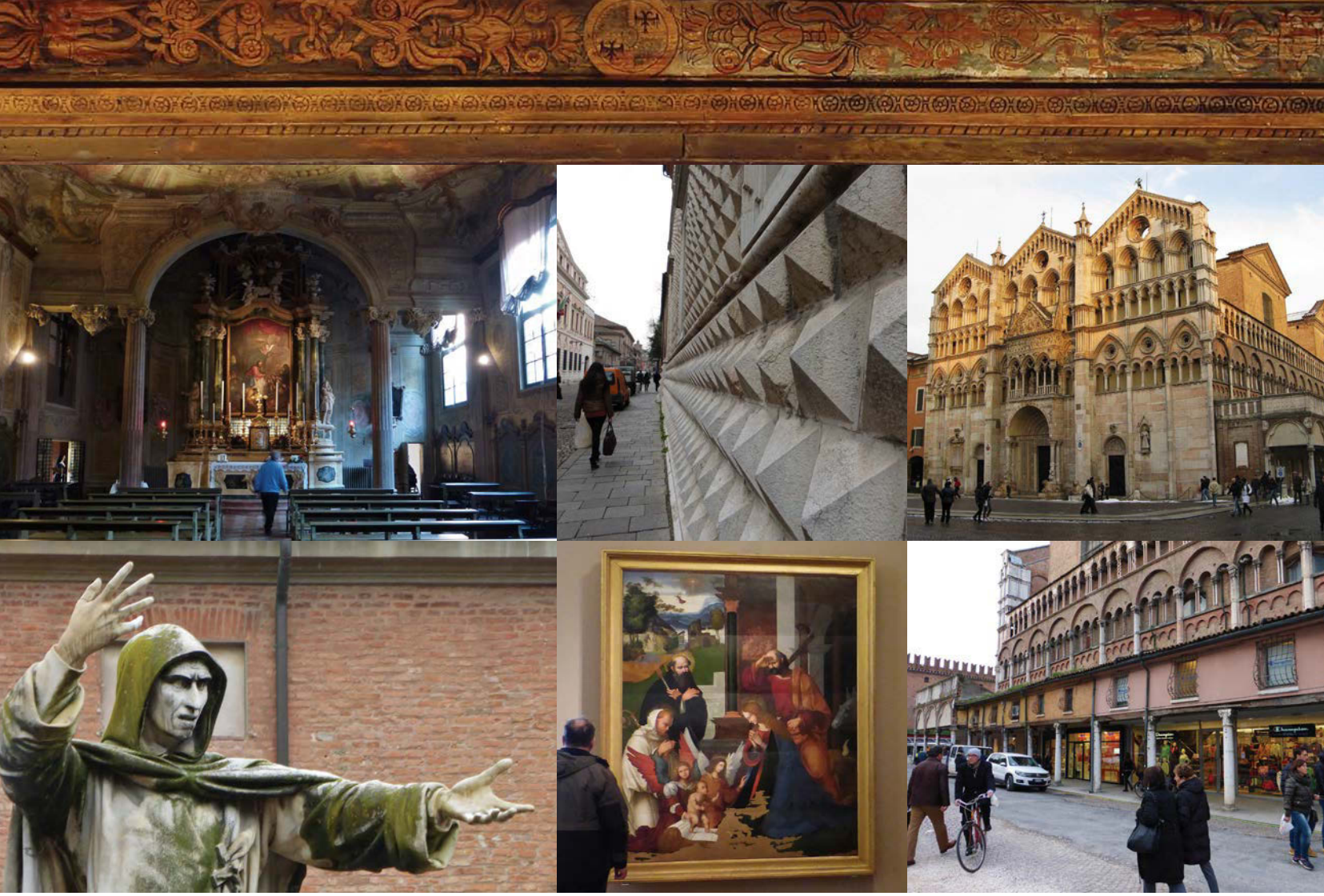
A few minutes' walk from our B&B, in Via Pergolata, we found another reminder of the Duke and Duchess – the Church and Convent of Corpus Domini, home to a community of the Poor Clares. Several members of the Este family are buried there. We wanted to see Lucrezia's tomb, and rang a bell at the Convent entrance door. An actual disembodied voice – this one issued from an intercom box – directed us to the church door. In the dimly lit Baroque interior, we spotted a figure in brown and white behind a grille in the left aisle, near the apse.

She greeted us charmingly, smiled knowingly when we mentioned Lucrezia's tomb, and sent for help. Help arrived – a small and energetic fellow who pretended we had come to learn the life story of St Catherine de'Vigri, the founder of the monastery. She was a mystic, a writer, and an expert baker – her ancient ovens still operate in the convent. She lived her later years in Bologna, where her incorrupt remains, dressed in her habit and seated on a throne, can be seen in Bologna's Corpus Domini Church. I must remember to visit when I next go to Bologna.

At last, and with a twinkle in his eye, our host showed us six marble ➤

This page: The Castello Estense has been standing since the 14th century, but though it doesn't show in this image, it too suffered damage in the recent earthquake; the castle's dungeons however, remain, intact – and have many stories to tell. Opposite: Inside the Castello today

Photograph © Provincia di Ferrara - Massimo Battaldi



Clockwise from top left: Interior of the Corpus Domini Convent; the diamond-shaped brickwork on the wall of the Palazzo dei Diamanti; the Cathedral dominates the main square; Piazza Trento e Trieste, where small shops cuddle up to the church's flanks; the National Art Gallery in the Palazzo dei Diamanti; Girolamo Savonarola, scourge of wickedness and the city's favourite son

slabs, with worn inscriptions, in the nun's choir. "Lvcretie Borgie" is carved on one, along with the Duke's name and those of two of their children. I listened for a voice, but Lucrezia wasn't talking.

THE SCOURGE OF WICKEDNESS

Girolamo Savonarola was born in Ferrara in 1452, and is a bit of a favourite son despite some bother he got into in Florence. He denounced the sins of Pope Alexander, the Medici, and just about everybody else; he gained control of Florence, lit bonfires fuelled with books and paintings, and finally was hanged and burned in Piazza Signoria.

A statue of the fiery (in more ways than one) preacher, showing him in full oratorical flight, stands near the castle in – appropriately – Piazza Savonarola. It was erected in 1875. An inscription on the plinth says, "To Girolamo Savonarola, in corrupt and servile times of vice and tyranny, the scourge!"

As Savonarola himself would probably declare, if he was still sermonizing: *Sic transit gloria mundi* – Thus passes worldly the glory.

But not *all* the glory of the world has faded, certainly not in Ferrara. Out in the Herculean Addition, the Palazzo dei Diamanti still sparkles in the sun. The building is named for the diamond-shaped stones that make up the façades – three-dimensional diamond shapes, I mean. Their points protrude, and it almost seems that the Renaissance architect, Biagio Rossetti, invented the world's first climbing wall. I suggest going inside instead. You'll find Ferrara's National Picture Gallery, with paintings by artists of the Ferrarese School, such as Cosmé Tura and Ercole dei Roberti.

And of course, the Cathedral of Ferrara dominates the main square, with its splendid Romanesque and Gothic marble façade. The interior is mostly Baroque restoration. In Piazza Trento e Trieste, small shops cuddle up to the great church's flanks. Nearby, the excellent Cathedral Museum holds a rare treasure, the exquisite white marble sculpture of the *Madonna della Melagrana* (Madonna of the Pomegranate) by Jacopo della Quercia from 1408, an unforgettable masterpiece.

Ferrara has much more to see and do – six miles of 15th-century walls can be hiked or biked; there's a fine archaeological museum housed in a palace built by Ludovico il Moro's ambassador, Antonio Costabili; poetry lovers can visit Ludovico Ariosto's house, where he worked on *Orlando Furioso*, and possibly dreamed of Lucrezia; the atmospheric old Jewish quarter can be explored around Via Mazzini; and Via Volte will lead you into the middle ages.

The city is atmospheric, beautiful in its own way, wildly historic, and, as I said, a bit eerie. It certainly deserves a visit of several days, at least – which means you'll probably need to wash your clothes. My advice is to shove your undies in a pillowcase, borrow a bicycle, and ride like a native to the laundromat. ■

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UK **£29.94** *for 2 years*
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Clockwise from top left: La Via Croce di Città in Aosta; Aosta Cattedrale; Chris above the former mining town of La Thuile; Sarriod de la Tour, in the comune of St Pierre; Aosta offers great shopping opportunities; Roman ruins and soaring mountains; Monte Bianco from the Val Ferret; grassy and mellow local cheese for sale.

Photography © Chris Allsop unless stated

48 HOURS IN...

Valle d'Aosta

It is now part of Italy, but it hasn't always been. **Chris Allsop** travels to Italy's smallest region and discovers a valley beloved of kings, popes, and – of course – skiers...

There's something of the hidden kingdom about the Valle D'Aosta, like an Italian Bhutan (but with a lot more ski lifts). Entering from France via the seemingly endless Mont Blanc Tunnel, you're transported from alpine foothills and farmland, in winter with horses stark black against frozen white pastures, and into an encirclement of soaring peaks. Arriving at sunset is particularly enchanting: as you switch back along the mountain roads your view alternates between the golden warmth of the sun-bathed west-facing ridges and the shadows deepening in the static pattern of the vertical snow-laden forests.

The Valle D'Aosta is exactly that: a valley; a beautiful glacial valley that sweeps east-west through the region (making it delightfully simple to navigate). The SS26 is the main highway, running the same valley floor route favoured by the Romans, fed by the Mont Blanc Tunnel and eventually tending south into neighbouring Piedmont. Hugging the western border is France, and the region has been bounced between the power centres of Burgundy and Savoy throughout its history. You can witness the legacy of this in the valley's many spectacular castles, taste it in the French-influenced cuisine, and hear it in the local Franco-Provençal dialect (a language still used by 55 per cent of the population, and, most crucially, also among the youth).

My 48 hours immersed in Valdostan culture began at an altitude of 4,760 feet in the former mining town of La Thuile. We approached it in the pitch ➤

Photograph © Enrico Romanzi

Photograph © Enrico Romanzi

WHAT TO SEE AND DO

AOSTA'S ROMAN RUINS ❶
The Roman capital of the Alpine region of the Roman Empire, Aosta (named after Emperor Augustus) is blessed with some extraordinary ruins, including the Teatro Romano, Cryptoporticus and Porta Praetoria, the latter forming the western entrance to the town in Roman times. In winter, the Christmas Market is pitched amid the ruins.

SS26 FOR CASTLE SPOTTING ❷
Aosta's main transport artery, the SS26 offers one the world's greatest castle-rich road-trip opportunities. Annexation of the region by the House of Savoy in the 11th century was the catalyst for the creation of numerous medieval castles in a variety of styles. Approaching Aosta from La Thuile, you tick off the turret and ruins near Villenueve, and Saint-Pierre Castle, among others, all defiant against a rugged mountainous backdrop. A highlight is the handsome Sarre Castle, built on the ruins of an ancient fortress ten minutes' drive from Aosta. Once used as a base by King Victor Emanuel II for hunting expeditions in the valley, it has been public property since 1989. Tours are good value at €5.

MONT BLANC CABLE CAR ❸
Frazione La Palud, 22
☎ +39 0165 89925
www.nuovefuniviemontebianco.com
Opening this spring, the new Mont Blanc cable car (the world's most expensive, built at a cost of €110m) ascends four kilometres from the village of Entrèves at 1,300m to Pointe Helbronner at 3,452m in around ten minutes. Besides the spectacular views of Mont Blanc and Europe's other 4,000-ers, the cable car allows you to access the legendary Vallée Blanche off-piste area and the Pavilion du Mont Fréty for snow shoe expeditions and the Nature Oasis (from June to September).

HELI-SKIING ❹
Heliski Cervinia
☎ +39 0166 949267
www.heliskicervinia.com
For the expert skier, the Valle D'Aosta is one of the few places in Europe where you can try heli-skiing (as well as being one of the cheaper options). Excursions set out from La Thuile, Courmayeur, and Gressoney, and offer access to otherwise impossible to reach off-piste terrain.

CHEVAL D'AOSTE STABLES ❺
☎ +39 340 30 81 785
www.chevaldaoste.it
Each summer, the Cheval D'Aoste stables open for high-altitude horse riding and pony-trekking. Beginners are welcome to join 'Baptism of the Saddle' lessons.

The existence of Castello Fénis was first recorded in 1242; its impressive battlements were added in the following two centuries

DON'T MISS

CRYPTOPORTICUS Perhaps the best preserved and – following extensive renovation – best presented example of this rare subterranean relic from Roman times, the Cryptoporticus forms part of the foundations to the 15th century Cathedral of St Mary of the Assumption. The atmospherically-lit line of archways helps you appreciate the precision of its architects. The structure is occasionally used for theatrical performances, so time your visit well if you wish to attend (see the events listings on www.aostalife.it).

dark, finally emerging into the merry streetlights of thin village streets.

La Thuile is one of five villages facing Mont Blanc that form an historical unit called the Valdigne. In Savoy times, the quintet was under direct control of the royal family, and developed traditions unique to this administrative nook; newly elected mayors, for example, to this day find a pine tree pruned of lower branches and freshly planted before their houses as a way of celebrating their taking of office.

Fénis Castle is one of numerous castles scattered throughout the mountains

Nowadays, La Thuile is best known as ski resort and is commonly referred to as "Little Siberia" for its dependable conditions. It's not the best known in the area (more high profile are Courmayeur, Cervinia and Monterosa). This is due, for the most part, to its sleepier après-ski scene, although another reason may be its relative scarcity of black runs (not an impediment to the Women's World Cup Downhill, which is being held in February, 2016, on the truly alarming Piste No. 3 – the first World Cup race to be hosted at the resort).

But what it lacks in terrifying ice cliffs it more than makes up for in extensive, flowing blue and red runs. The views from the pistes are also incredible, with some of Europe's most towering peaks – Mont Blanc, the Matterhorn, Monte Rosa, and Gran Paradiso – visible on a clear day. You can even ski into France – La Thuile teams up with its French neighbour La Rosière to form Espace San Bernardo, meaning that a single ski pass offers you 80 pistes, or 160km of slopes, to indulge in (snowboarders beware of the epically dreadful button lifts returning you from the French side to the Italian – you have been warned). Best of all, due to La Thuile's lack of glitz, the pistes can feel uncrowded, even in high season. (Locals like to say that those staying at glamorous Courmayeur come across to enjoy

Photograph © Enrico Romanzi

The spa at the new, five-star Nira Montana hotel

The Cryptoporticus

Aosta City Hall

the extra space at La Thuile before sneaking back in the evenings.)

However, that may all be changing. The Nira Montana, the resort's first five-star hotel, opened at the end of 2014. A Design Hotels member, the hotel is beautifully presented with designer touches, rooms that smell like Darjeeling tea, and a fully equipped spa. The hotel has an up-market restaurant and a well-stocked bar, around which La Thuile's après ski scene has reoriented.

Outside of the ski season, the alpine landscape, carpeted in shaggy firs and drifts of silver birch, offers much for the nature lover and adventure sports fans: around La Thuile alone, mountain bikers can enjoy 220 km of track, transporting their bikes up the slopes using the chair lifts. Valle D'Aosta's national park, which it shares with Piedmont, is the Parco Nazionale Gran Paradiso – the first national park to be established in Italy. The trekking here is superb, with abundant wildlife, and the routes are serviced by cosy, traditional rifugios serving a surfeit of carb-heavy cuisine.

Snaking down the switchbacks from La Thuile to join up with the motorway tracing the valley floor takes three quarters of an hour, but it's the winding mountain roads that adds the time – from the Mont Blanc Tunnel in the region's northwest corner to the Piedmont border in the southeast only takes about an hour to drive. The River Dora widens out along the valley floor as you approach Aosta, and it's not long before you start to see fortresses rearing up on both sides of the motorway. There are numerous castles scattered throughout the mountains, but of the ten most spectacular you can find Fénis Castle, Saint-Pierre Castle, Issogne Castle, the Bard Fortress (featuring in the forthcoming *Avengers: Age of Ultron*), Ussel Castle, Avise Castle, Sarre Royal Castle with its distinctive square tower, and Castello La Mothe all in view while driving the SS26.

Besides royalty, popes have also favoured the Valle D'Aosta for a bit of R&R. Both John Paul II and, later, his successor, Benedict XVI, have holidayed in a chalet at the picturesque village of Les Combes. At the time of going to press, the valley grandees ➤

DON'T MISS

CHOCOLAT
La Thuile was awarded the title 'City of Chocolate' in 2009 by a club of serious chocolate appreciators, and central to this success was Chocolat, a family-run chocolate house and *pasticceria* with a master chocolatier, Stefano Collomb, at work behind the scenes. See the giant chocolate sculpture of Pope John Paul II's head in the window. Inside, immerse yourself (literally if needs be) in the chocolate fondue, with unmixed halves of fluid milk and dark chocolate available. www.chocolat-collomb.it

WHERE TO STAY

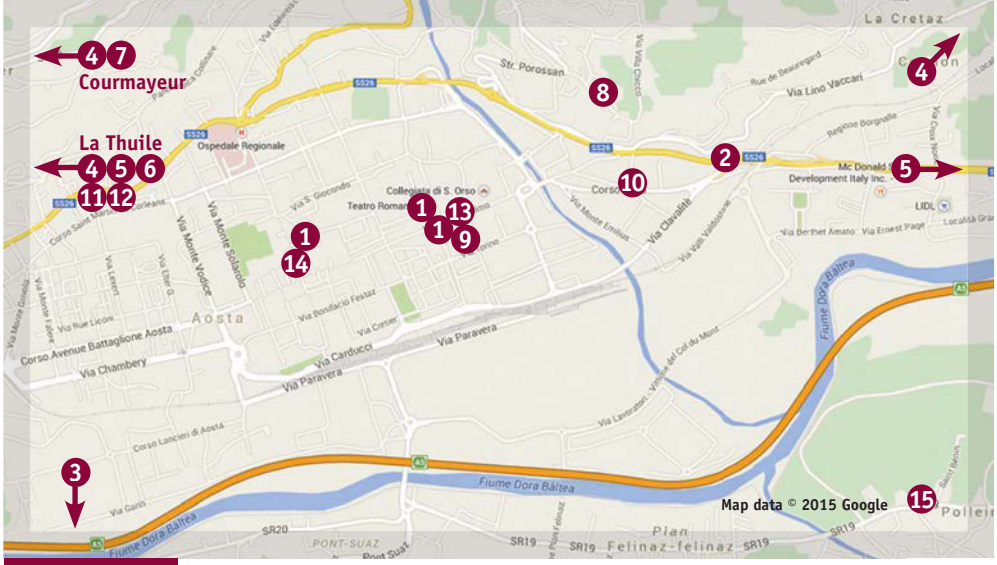
NIRA MONTANA ❻
Localita Arly, 87 – La Thuile
☎ +39 0165 883125
www.niramontana.com/en
Opened in December of last year, the Nira Montana is La Thuile's first five-star hotel. The exterior is broad-eaved and traditional, but inside it's all modern art on the walls and Baxter steel and leather loungers lolling before an open fire. There's also a spa (see image immediately right), and, best of all, it's really four-star prices.

HOTEL BOUTON D'OR ❼
Strada Statale, 26 – Courmayeur
☎ +39 0165 846729
www.hotelboutondor.com
In Courmayeur, the Hotel Bouton d'Or distinguishes itself by virtue of its "three star with five-star service" reputation. Near the city centre, rooms are spacious and spotless, and a sauna is available for post-piste relaxation. Expect a warm welcome from Andreas and Patrizia, as well as a wide selection at the breakfast buffet.

HOTEL MILLELUCI ❽
Località Porossan Roppoz, 15 – Aosta
☎ +39 0165 235278
www.hotelmilleluci.com
Located 1km from the city centre, the Hotel Milleluci is a converted farmhouse set into the hillsides above Aosta. As a member of the Saveurs du Val D'Aoste, this four-star is Valdostan through and through with ornamental antique skis and a selection of Alpine cheeses a feature in the buffet-style breakfasts. Other trappings to expect include claw-foot baths, a Jacuzzi, and a Turkish bath.

MAISON BONDAZ ❾
Via Saint-Anselme, 36 – Aosta
☎ +39 345 63 73 351
www.maisonbondaz.it
Conveniently located in the city's historical pedestrian zone, this family-run boutique hotel has the warmth and charm of a B&B. The hotel's décor makes features of its medieval architecture, while Jeanette's breakfasts, served by the fireplace, are legendary. The homemade apple juice is fresh from the proprietor's nearby farm.

HOTEL CECCHIN ❿
Via Ponte Romano, 27 – Aosta
☎ +39 0165 45262
www.hotelcecchin.com
Five minutes from the centre is the three-star Hotel Cecchin. Located next to the Ponte Romano, the hotel offers good value for money and clean, spacious accommodation. Fresh baked pastries are available for breakfast, and there's an optional underground garage available for a small fee.



WHERE TO EAT

STARS 11
Località Arly, 87 – La Thuile
☎ **+39 0165 883125**
www.niramontana.com/en
With the opening of Nira Montana's in-house restaurant, Stars, the resort of La Thuile finally has a quality alternative to the hearty traditional restaurants that dominate the village's dining options. Not that it's untethered to its locale: the ingredients are local sourced, the dishes seasonal, and the menu offers interesting twists on regional specialities.
€ € €

LO RIONDET 12
S.S. Piccolo San Bernardo, 4 – La Thuile
☎ **+39 0165 88 40 06**
www.loriondet.it
Lo Riondet offers an authentic chalet dining experience without having to travel too far from La Thuile. Accessible only by snow cat (the restaurant runs a regular service) during the ski season, expect jugs of wine, pale orange half-moons of *fontina* served raclette-style on every table, and a generally boisterous, all-round good time.
€ €

GIULIANI RISTORANTE 13
Via St Anselmo, 49 – Aosta
☎ **+39 393 665 5513**
www.giulianiristorante.com
The voodoo-esque branding is a little unnerving, but it's just another quirk in a winning formula for this family-run restaurant housed in an old underground stable. It serves a contemporary take on traditional Aosta cuisine with a flair you'd expect at much higher prices.
€ €

TRATTORIA ALDENTE 14
Via Croce de Ville, 34 – Aosta
☎ **+39 0165194596**
www.aldentetrattoria.eu
This is the traditional red-check tablecloth trattoria experience done extremely well. Cosy and unassuming, Trattoria Aldente offers simple, regional cuisine cooked to perfection, with friendly waiting staff ready to advise on wines and dish choices.
€ €

AGRITURISMO LA REINA 15
Località Saint-Benin, 17/A – Aosta
☎ **+39 0165 253775**
www.lareina.it
A farmhouse stay, the La Reina's dining room is also open to non-residents. The set menu offers better value than the à la carte with either the €20 or €30 options. Expect vast bowls of polenta, regional cheeses, and Valdostan dishes such as *crespelle alla valdostana*.
€ €

DON'T MISS

HIKING
As the warmer weather prevails, wild flowers bloom over the lush green Alpine valleys and hiking without snow shoes becomes delightfully possible once again. Valle d'Aosta's Parco Nazionale del Gran Paradiso, named after Italy's highest mountain, offers a plethora of trails to help you lose yourself (although not actually get lost) in pristine wilderness. Go high altitude with the Alte Vie 1 and 2 blue-riband trails while staying at traditional mountain rifugios along the way, devouring braised meat and potato dumplings before falling into a well-earned slumber. And keep an eye out for the majestic Alpine ibex – in the early 19th century its numbers had dropped dangerously low due to over-hunting, but its population has happily since bounced back.

were still awaiting a response to their invitation for Pope Francis to follow in his predecessor's footsteps.

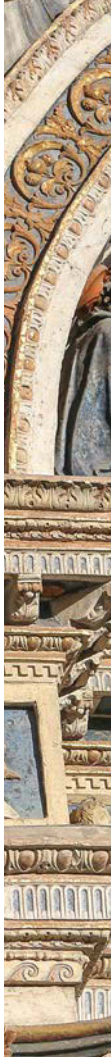
Driving through the valley, you might notice grapevines scaling the valley walls. The Valle D'Aosta has some of Europe's highest vineyards; the wine is produced in small amounts and, as such, is mostly consumed within the region. So stock up while you're here: the bracing mountain air imbues the wines with a delicious freshness and they're wonderfully aromatic. Look out for delicious indigenous grape varieties such as Fumin, which produces a tannic, peppery wine reminiscent of Syrah.

You'll encounter small villages and towns all along the SS26 – these are cobbled into 70 municipalities beyond Aosta city limits. If at some point in conversation a local refers to living on the "right side of the valley", they're using a shorthand to refer to the side of the valley that receives the most sun – this sunny side is the "right side", with correspondingly more expensive real estate. Inhabitants of the wrong side suffer from an absence of sun on their windowsills for a 20-day stint every winter.

Founded at the beginning of the Imperial Era, in 25BC, Aosta was part of a chain of towns linking through the Europe Crossway that breached the wall of the Alps. Named after the Emperor Augustus, the city that stands today is, by modern standards, small. The total population, including surrounding areas, is only about 60,000 – about a half of the region's total. But with the Valle D'Aosta being semi-autonomous, and not coincidentally one of the richest provinces in Italy, this amounts to cobbled medieval streets lined with some serious shopping opportunities.

Upmarket ski tourists, shoulders bristling with furs, mingle with the locals in the pedestrianised area that takes in some of the prettiest parts of the city. Pop into La Vineria on Via St Anselmo (named after a somewhat neglected local saint), the town's main commercial drag, for superbly knowledgeable staff who'll point you to interesting (and cheaper) alternatives to the most famous local wine brand, Les Crêtes. And where there is wine, there is cheese: *fontina* is probably the most famous regional variety; made in the area since the 12th century, it's hard to eat a meal without this semi-hard, cow's milk treat featuring (usually melted). Find the Maison de la Fontine (aka ErbaVoglio) on Via Monseigneur de Sales for a pungently superb selection of Valdostan cheeses, including some made exclusively for the shop, like the grassy, mellow Renque Fleur.

But, however delicious melted fontina is, it's the fantastic Roman ruins that will linger longest in your memory: the windows in the multi-storey remains of the theatre framing a looming peak, or the tiered stone seating bearing long white cushions of snow. Access to these are free, as is admission to the detailed and well-decked out Archaeology Museum (Piazza Roncas, 12) tracing the city's history from pre-Roman times (also see francescocorni.com for artist's impressions of how the archaeological sites used to look). Unfortunately, you won't be able to visit the amphitheatre as the St Joseph nuns are now housed on top of it, but the tell-tale curve of the nunnery following the ancient design is an example of how this city, and region as a whole, has stepped so lightly into the grand shoes of its impressive history. Now hit the Via St Anselmo and shop till you drop. ■



Detail above the entrance to St Mary of the Assumption Cathedral

Aosta's Roman theatre

Photograph © Enrico Romanzi

Cushions for sale on Via St Anselmo

GETTING THERE

➤ BY PLANE
Swiss flies regularly and directly to Geneva from London with return fares starting at £86 from London City, £80 from London Heathrow and £58 from London Gatwick. Flights from Manchester (via Zurich) start from £225.40 and it costs £189 from Birmingham (via Zurich). www.swiss.com. EasyJet flies direct to Geneva from across the UK. Flying to Turin with BA, easyJet, Jet2, Monarch or Ryanair is equally viable.

➤ BY CAR
The journey time from Calais to Valle D'Aosta is around ten hours. Access the Mont Blanc Tunnel from Geneva, and don't forget your snow chains!

➤ BY TRAIN
Eurostar operates an overnight service from London St Pancras to the French Alps. Connections can then be made to Aosta town, where buses are available to the resorts. Taking local trains through the mountains is, at best, complicated.

The Piazza Emile Chanoux is Aosta's principal square

Photograph © Enrico Romanzi

➤ KEY TO RESTAURANT PRICES
(full meal per person, not including wine)
€ Up to €25
€ € €26-€50
€ € € More than €50

The Rape of the Sabines

Giambologna set out to prove his excellence by being able to represent anatomical precision whilst retaining high grace and beauty, and a sense of continual movement

GIAMBOLOGNA (1529-1608) WAS FOREIGN, from Douai in northern France, which was then part of Flemish territory. Jean Boulogne became Italianised to Giambologna, as was the fashion, when he made the Italian peninsula his home. He arrived in Florence via Rome, where he had spent two years, after finishing an apprenticeship in Antwerp. Giambologna went to Rome to study and learn from the great masters, both living and from the past. He studied the ideal beauty in the ancient statues and the energy and emotion of the works by Michelangelo, who held artistic court at the time and was revered more than anybody else.

In Rome he was lucky to meet a patron in the Florentine wealthy banker Bernardo Vecchietti, who subsequently provided him the introduction needed to enter the artistic circle surrounding the grand ducal court in Florence. Amidst the back stabbing, intrigue and fiercely competitive atmosphere of the artists, all vying for commissions, this outsider, over the following decades, rose to be the undisputed king of sculpture by the end of the 1500s in Florence. Giambologna excelled in both marble and bronze statuary.

One of his greatest works is the marble statue *The Rape of the Sabines* (1581-2). This statue is fascinating for two reasons, the first being its sheer virtuosity and artistry. Michelangelo had raised the bar of excellence in sculpture and all work produced was compared to his. Giambologna's *Rape of the Sabines* was not commissioned by a patron but instead was born as an artistic challenge from the artist himself. He set out to prove his excellence by being able to represent anatomical precision whilst retaining high grace and beauty, a strong sense of continual movement whilst not losing a sense of the moment, and unbelievable technical virtuosity with a three figure composition – all carved from one block of marble. He succeeded.

Photograph © iStock

The statue in the Piazza della Signoria

Photograph © iStock

Photograph © iStock

He lived on a fixed stipend from the grand duke, who, upon seeing this sculpture in the artist's workshop, wanted it to be placed in the Piazza della Signoria, where it stands today. The muscular representation of the crouching man is so realistic, the backs of the feet of the women feel fleshy to the eye and the indentation of the standing man's hand on her buttocks is so impressive.

Secondly, Giambologna freed sculpture from one point perspective; he created a work that has no frontal view point, it has a revolving view. This piece has no front, or back, or side, and it entices the viewer to walk around it, which further enhances the sense of wonderful spiral movement from the bodies' positions, as well as a markedly new shift in spectator involvement. Art parallels science and this is the period when earth's geocentric position had been shaken and, in the beginning of the 1600s, Galileo would prove the heliocentric theories already being talked about in the 1580s. The limitless viewpoint of Giambologna's oeuvre mirrors the endless space of the universe.

The spin doctor for the grand ducal court, the erudite Dominican friar Vincenzo Borghini, named the statue the *Rape of Sabines* after the episode from early ancient Roman history. The Romans, needing to increase their female population, invited the neighbouring group, the Sabines, for a peaceful feast, and upon a signal from their leader, Romulus, they abducted the Sabine women, sending away the Sabine men. Borghini could have meant for this to pose as an analogy to the strength of the Grand duke over his enemies, or, it could have been a reference to Florence being the new Rome of the modern era. However, more interesting than the intended message of Borghini is that it the statue was born with no name. It is one of the first works of art for art's sake, freed from any narrative; born as a response to genius and to embody genius. ■

ABOUT THE WRITER

FREYA MIDDLETON is a private tour guide and writer who lives in Florence, Tuscany. You can read her blog online or learn more about her tours at www.freyasflorence.com

Photography © Freya Middleton, unless otherwise stated

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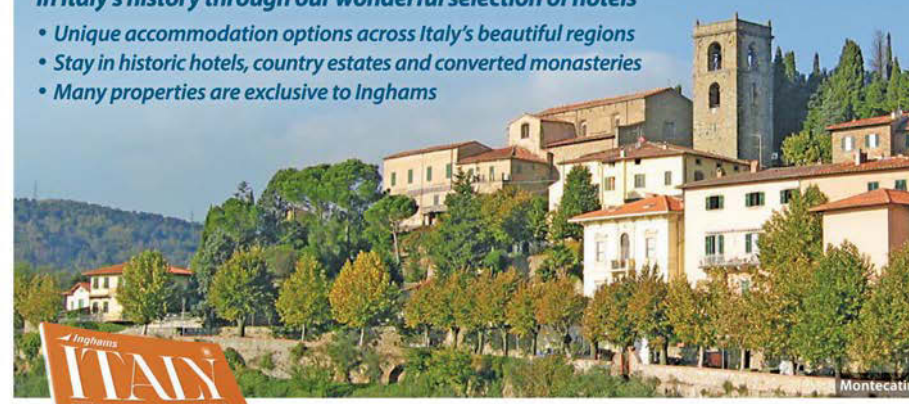
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Hotels & B&Bs

A romantic stay for two, or a friendly welcome for the solo traveller... Here's our pick of the **best new discoveries** for those planning a quick jaunt to Italy...

Relais San Pietro, a romantic hideaway in the Tuscan hills

RELAIS SAN PIETRO

This family-run establishment is set in an 18th-century converted hamlet in the Tuscan hills and is pure paradise for those seeking a quiet and romantic retreat.

This Tuscan hotel is pure paradise for those seeking a quiet and romantic retreat

The owner, Luigi Protti, had been in Milan for 50 years when he decided to seek country life for his family. Since then the Protti family has carefully restored their home to its present charming form. Luigi and his family now take enormous, and understandable, pride in their new property.

The bedrooms have gorgeous old rafters, wrought-iron beds, elegantly hand-painted wardrobes, and rugs on terracotta-tiled floors. For cool autumn nights there are cream sofas and log fires. The panoramic pool surrounded by olive groves is the perfect spot for relaxing or sipping a drink while enjoying the sunset.

In summer guests dine at tables elegantly dressed in white on a terrace overlooking the gardens and views of the olive groved valley beyond.

The restaurant serves home-made and traditional food and locally produced olive oil. Bread comes fresh from the bread oven.

An atmosphere of luxurious calm and seclusion prevails.

CONTACT DETAILS

➤ RELAIS SAN PIETRO
☎ +39 0575 650100
info@polvano.com
www.polvano.com

LOCANDA POGGIOLEONE

We all love to be spoilt in a luxury 5-star hotel, however solo travellers always seem to share the same story when staying in hotels. The bigger and smarter the hotel, the more lonely you can feel.

One thing to bear in mind though, is if you are staying somewhere intimate, can you really expect your host to have a good command of the English language? Add to the mixture of fun, lots of arm waving and speaking louder in the hope that it translates better as well as pulling out that old dog-eared phrase book. WiFi may not be that great, but sometimes, that's a huge benefit.

I'd like to share an example of a smaller hotel/bed and breakfast where I've stayed and where I have been made to feel most welcome.

This is the Locanda Poggioleone in Pozzuolo. The owner is a retired gentleman. Retirement was anathema to him so he bought a 12-bedroom hotel in a small village near Lago Trasimeno. Although the village is pretty uninspiring, it's where Umbria borders Tuscany, 10 minutes' drive to the lake, 20 minutes to Cortona or to Montepulciano and just an hour or so to Assisi.

The gardens are large, adorned with roses selected by the ladies of the house, and the gentleman also owns the local farm from where all the produce comes, as well as the local vineyard. Having a restaurant, he brought his little sister in to cook, so only the finest and traditional fare is on offer. The family came to sit with me during dinner, and one night they pulled a few other guests and myself together for a wine tasting.

The gardens here are large, adorned with roses selected by the ladies of the house

CONTACT DETAILS

➤ LOCANDA POGGIOLEONE
☎ 07 595 9519 Fax 07 595 9609
info@locandapoggioleone.it
www.locandapoggioleone.it

➤ TUSCAN SECRETS
☎ 01344 627586
sales@tuscansecrets.co.uk
www.tuscansecrets.com

Locanda Poggioleone, a friendly welcome for the solo traveller

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Ecco La Cucina Mary Stipo Potter ☎ 001-321-412-2011

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DOWN TO EARTH IN *Milan*

We all know Milan's reputation as the Paris of Italy, a city where Italians actually forget to eat because the only thing that matters more than a *bella figura* is having the slimmest *bella figura* on the block. **Adrian Mourby** explores the city without the hang-up on fashion....

Photograph © iStock

Photography © iStock

Before heading into the city centre, it's essential to visit the massive Castello Sforzesco

The Castello Sforzesco houses much of the city's art

Photography © Kate Tadman-Mourby unless stated

When Universal Expo 2015 begins in May we're going to be hearing a lot about Milan and its catwalks, but this city is so much more than the "Golden Quad" with its top fashion houses. Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, Arturo Toscanini and Luchino Visconti, the writers Alessandro Manzoni and Giovanni Verga, and composers like Donzetti,Verdi and Puccini were all closely associated with Milan long before Giorgio Armani and Gianni Versace made their names in this stately city.

So this summer take a walk through the unofficial capital of Northern Italy and see how Milan is so much more than fashion.

Start in the early days of the Roman Empire with Basilica Sant' Ambrogio where the Ambrosian Chant was invented by the eponymous saint. Ambrosius was Bishop of Mediolanum (as Milan was known) from 340-397AD and famously defied various Roman emperors. After his death Ambrosius was made patron saint of the city. His body is still buried in this Romanesque church, one of four that he built in Milan. It was originally named Basilica Martyrum because numerous martyrs of the Roman persecutions had been buried here.

From Piazza Sant'Ambrogio it's only a five-minute walk north to one of the most famous paintings in the world. *La última cena* (The Last Supper) is frescoed on a wall in Chiesa Santa Maria delle Grazie. Today tourists are conducted in small groups through a series of space-age electronic airlocks until you reach the empty white refectory where Leonardo's faded masterpiece occupies one wall.

Another five-minute stroll east will bring you to the Museo

NEW IN MILAN THIS SUMMER

➤ LUXURY HOTELS

Two major new hotels will be opening in Milan in May: a ME by Meliá in the Piazza della Repubblica, and the city's first Mandarin Oriental, which is located close to La Scala. Additionally, the Luxury Collection is re-opening its historic 1930s Excelsior Hotel Gallia in time for Expo 2015 and the all-suite, impossibly luxurious Hotel Seven Stars Galleria (which is actually inside the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II) is adding a penthouse on its fifth floor with its own billiard room and private kitchen.

➤ A VIEW FROM ABOVE

This summer will also see the inauguration of a new Passeggiata over the roof of the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II that will give the public a 250 metre long walkway from which to admire the Piazza Duomo, Piazza della Scala and the Milanese skyline. The Passeggiata will be open from 7am to 11pm and access will be through two high speed lifts.

A view of the Piazza del Duomo from the Museo Novecento

Archeologico, which contains many reminders of Milan's Etruscan and Roman past. The museum is housed in a former convent with some well-preserved medieval frescoes of its own, and within the inner cloister you'll see a polygonal tower that was part of Milan's medieval walls.

Before heading into the city centre, it's essential to visit the massive Castello Sforzesco where Leonardo painted a bizarre canopy of very convincing trees on the ceiling of the Sala delle Asse, his room in the castle. Also on show is the *Rondanini Pietà*, Michelangelo's last sculpture, which he worked on intermittently for the last 14 years of his life, but which was left incomplete when he died in 1564.

This mighty fortress, one of the biggest citadels in Europe, was for centuries the home of the Dukes of Milan. The Visconti ruled from here for over 170 years and then the Sforza family took over for a further 90 years before the Holy Roman Emperor appropriated the Duchy. Nowadays it's home to several museums, including one containing 700 musical instruments from the 15th to 20th centuries, an apt reminder that up until the early 20th century Milan was best known as the European capital of music. The Milanese dukes had been great patrons of composers and musicians and La Scala (also known as the New Royal Ducal Theatre) was the most important opera venue in Italy.

From the castle it's a straight kilometre and a half walk to Milan's soaring white Gothic cathedral. You first catch sight of it at the bottom of Via Dante across a piazza thronged with people at any time of day. Wander the cathedral's great, gloomy aisles and be sure not to miss the statue of flayed St Bartholomew, his skin folded neatly over one arm; but the real treat is the view from the flat marble roof, all the way to the Alps. ➤

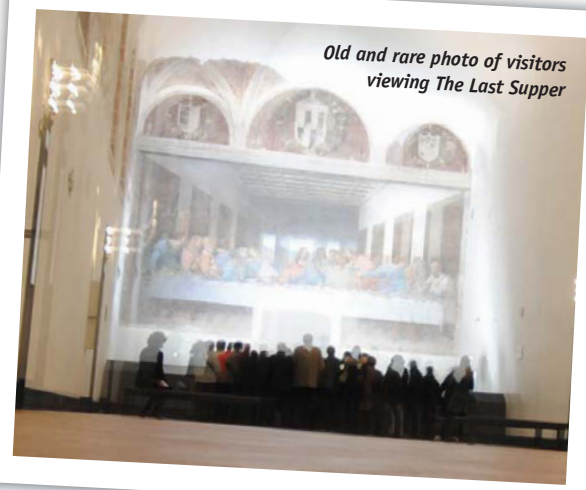
WHERE TO EAT

➤ PASTICCERIA COVA
Via Montenapoleone, 8
☎ +39 02 76 00 0578
www.pasticceriacova.it
There's been a cafe here since 1817. Gossip and Cova go hand in hand, they say. Stand at the bar for the best espresso in Milan (€1). In fact, have everything at the bar. Sit down and you can pay ten times as much with service. But do sit to do justice to a slice of rich Cova Panettone, Giuseppe Verdi's favourite when he was in town.

➤ IL SALUMAIO
Via Montenapoleone, 12
☎ +39 02 7600 1123
www.ilsalumaiodimontenapoleone.it
Rumour has it that Milan's sandwich-eating elite send out for lunch from Salumaio. Tucked away and far too famous to advertise, it's not an easy place to find. Enjoy courtyard dining with a dish of *tortellini con ricotta e rucola al pomodoro* and whatever wine the waiter tells you to order. But if you get out your camera the beautiful people really do bury their heads in the menu.

➤ ARMANI CAFE
Via Alessandro Manzoni, 31
☎ +39 02 7231 8600
www.armani.com
Armani is slowly taking over Milan and the city's best Sunday brunch is definitely upstairs at this café next to the Armani Bookstore. When it first opened, the soap dispensers in the bathrooms were Armani originals worth €600 each, but so many were stolen they're now nailed down. For dinner you can't beat the saffron risotto.

➤ MARTINI BAR
Corso Venezia, 15
☎ +39 02 7601 1154
www.dolcegabbana.com
Walk through the D&G store to access this totally black bar (apart from one red dragon on the floor). Cocktails are Martini-orientated and the clientele impossibly slim and intimidatingly chic.



Old and rare photo of visitors viewing The Last Supper

Wander the cathedral's great, gloomy aisles and be sure not to miss the statue of flayed St Bartholomew, his skin folded neatly over one arm

Milan's world famous Cathedral, viewed from the Monumento Equestre

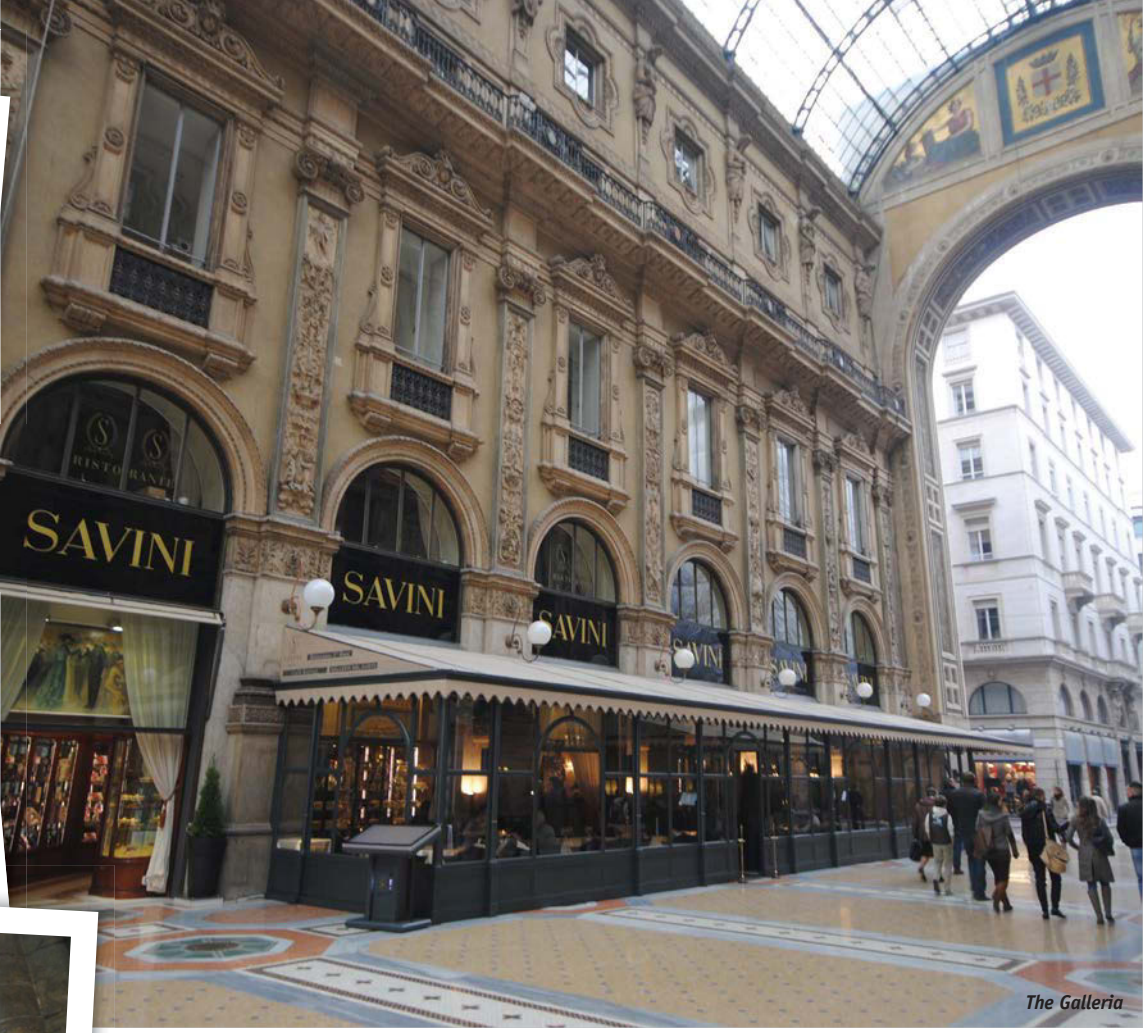
Cloisters at the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie

Outside the Church on a typically grey day

The statue of St Bartholomew

It's good luck – if you're not a bull, or from Turin

La Scala at night



The Galleria

On the other side of the piazza rises the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, Milan's "drawing room". This must be one of the most beautiful shopping centres ever built

South of Piazza del Duomo stands the Museo del Novecento, which contains Milan's impressive collection of 20th century art. A broad spiral ramp leads up to a wonderful view of the Duomo from the topmost floor and you'll pass plenty of Modigliani, Picasso, Klee and Matisse works en route. The museum was originally constructed as the Palazzo dell'Arengario, a pair of symmetrical local government buildings begun in 1936 during the Fascist era and only completed in 1956. It was converted into a museum in 2010.

On the other side of the piazza rises Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, Milan's "drawing room". This must be one of the most beautiful shopping centres ever built. It's housed within a four-storey double arcade designed in 1861 and completed it 1877. The galleria skilfully links the Duomo and La Scala but is a visitor attraction in its own right. Locals come here to gossip and converge on its octagonal marbled hub, where they grind their heels into the genitals of a mosaic bull, the symbol of Turin, Milan's civic rival. It's considered good luck (though not for the bull).

Walking through the Galleria will bring you to the Teatro alla Scala. If you can't afford a night at the opera, visit the museum next door. For €6 you get to gaze down into the gorgeously gilded auditorium where Rossini, Donizetti and Puccini premiered their work and where Pavarotti and Roberto Alagna have been booed off stage.

Following Via Manzoni north for just two or three minutes you'll come to the Palazzo Poldi Pezzoli on the right. Here, a silent courtyard leads up to a private collection of ➤

WHERE TO STAY

➤ HOTEL PRINCIPE DI SAVOIA
Piazza della Repubblica, 17
☎ +39 02 62301
www.hotelprincipedisavoia.com
The Principe is simply the most glamorous hotel in Milan, with its dark "London Clubland" bar and old-money décor. The location on the edge of the old city walls makes for a peaceful stay and there's a free limousine shuttle into the city centre every half hour.

➤ THE GRAY
Via San Raffaele, 6
☎ +39 02 720 8951
www.hotelthegray.com
A large purple swing hangs in the reception of this very colour-conscious hotel, and the three floors are colour-coded: one red, one blue and one yellow. By contrast, the mezzanine dining room, Le Noir, is very, very black and unfairly ignored by the Milanese. It serves great Mediterranean food and deserves to be better known.

➤ GRAND HOTEL ET DE MILAN
Via Alessandro Manzoni, 29
☎ +39 02 723 141
www.grandhoteletdemilan.it
This was Verdi's home when his operas were being premiered in Milan. You can actually stay in the opulent suite where he died. Other celebrity guests (who survived) include Maria Callas, Richard Burton and Sophia Loren. Many historic features survive including the original Stigler Hydraulic Lift.

➤ HOTEL MILANO SCALA
Via dell'Orso, 7
☎ +39 02 870 961
www.hotelmilanoscala.it
This opera-themed eco-hotel pipes Italian arias into the public areas, while in the Prima Donna restaurant the menu is divided into acts, not courses. Opera photography is everywhere too. Escape, if you must, to the Sky Terrace for a cocktail and some superb rooftop views.

GETTING THERE

➤ BY PLANE
British Airways (0844 493 0787; www.ba.com) flies daily from Heathrow and Gatwick (tickets from £159.05).

➤ BY TRAIN
Railbookers (020 3780 2222, www.railbookers.com) offers city breaks from the UK to Milan with 2-night, 5-star hotel accommodation including breakfast and return rail travel from £589 per person. Prices based on two people sharing.

In the mighty Grand Hotel Et De Milan where Milan's favourite composer, Giuseppe Verdi died, his room is preserved as a memorial

The room where Verdi died

Renaissance paintings. Do not miss the haunting portrait of a 15th-century young woman by Piero del Pollaiolo. No one knows her name, but she's on all the guide books, a beautiful symbol not just of the museum but of Milan too.

A little further up the road stands the mighty Grand Hotel et de Milan where Milan's favourite composer, Giuseppe Verdi, died. His room is preserved as a memorial in this opulent hotel. Verdi premiered 10 of his 26 operas in Milan and on 27 January 1901 horses outside the hotel had their hooves muffled so as not to disturb the dying composer.

We're now on the very edge of the Fashion District, also known as the Golden Quad, but it's not all shops and ateliers. Turn down Via Montenapoleone and see if you can find Museo Bagatti Valsecchi, which sits above Salumaio, one of Milan's most fashionable cafés. In the 19th century two eccentric brothers decided to turn back the clock and live in medieval style within their home. Now you can see where they ate, slept and even took a medieval shower in this affluent historical theme park.

Finally, on Montenapoleone itself, we come to Caffè Cova di Milano, which was founded in 1817 and is Italy's oldest *pasticceria*. It was originally situated next to La Scala and was a second home to composers like Puccini, Leoncavallo and Mascagni as well as the conductor Arturo Toscanini. In 1950 it moved, with all its fittings, to a new home in Via Montenapoleone and is now where all the fashion journalists meet.

We are now entering the Golden Quad; time for a coffee, or maybe time to go home. This is after all a guide to Milan without its catwalks... ■

THINGS TO SEE AND DO

➤ **BASILICA SANT'AMBROGIO**
Piazza Sant'Ambrogio, 15
☎ **+39 02 8645 0895**
www.basilicasantambrogio.it

➤ **CHIESA SANTA MARIA DELLE GRAZIE**
€6.50 *Piazza Santa Maria delle Grazie, 2*
☎ **+39 02 467 6111**
www.grazieop.it

➤ **MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICO**
€12 *Corso Magenta*
☎ **+39 02 804843**
www.milanmuseumguide.com

➤ **IL DUOMO**
€7 *Piazza del Duomo, 18*
☎ **+39 02 878628**
www.duomomilano.it

➤ **MUSEO DEL NOVECENTO**
€5 *Piazza del Duomo, 12*
☎ **+39 02 4335 3522**
www.museodelnovecento.org

➤ **GALLERIA VITTORIO EMANUELE II**
Piazza Duomo
☎ **+39 02 7740 4343**
www.visitamilano.it

➤ **TEATRO LA SCALA**
Via Filodrammatici, 2
☎ **+39 02 88791**
www.teatroallascala.org

➤ **PALAZZO POLDI PEZZOLI**
€9 *Via Alessandro Manzoni, 12*
☎ **+39 02 794889**
www.museopoldipezzoli.it

➤ **GRANDHOTEL ET DE MILAN**
Via Manzoni, 29
☎ **+39 02 723141**
www.grandhoteletdemilan.it

➤ **MUSEO BAGATTI VALSECCHI**
€8 *Via Santo Spirito, 10*
☎ **+39 02 7600 6132**
www.museobagattivalsecchi.org

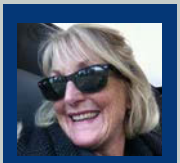
➤ **CAFFÈ COVA DI MILANO**
Via Montenapoleone, 8
☎ **+39 02 7600 5599**
www.pasticceriacova.it

The Museo Bagatti Valsecchi, interior

The Museo Bagatti Valsecchi, exterior

Building the Dream

In the latest instalment of her rebuild diaries, **Jane Smith** sees her new home beginning to take shape as the builders start work on the ground floor ceiling and the first floor…



Jane Smith runs an estate agency in Le Marche: www.magicmarche.com. You can contact Jane at: jane@magicmarche.com. Her husband Richard runs a restoration management company: www.smithpropertyconsultancy.com You can contact Richard at: richard@smithprops.com

It was March 1st, the blossom was blooming and we were ahead of schedule. If the weather held, the next eight weeks would see the structure finished. With the ground floor structure now in place, the first floor would essentially see a repeat of the ground floor works, plus some additions.

Forming the ceilings was the first job. We had two deliveries of beautiful 'river washed' timber beams and window lintels which would remain on show in all rooms. The beams were sourced by our builder and were made of oak at least 100 years old. The term 'river washed' refers to the soft and natural indentations, formed over time, which add to the character of the timber. These were placed in position, resting on the wall tops. Parallel steel girders were then laid between the walls to support the concrete blocks that would become our new first floor. Beneath the blocks, timber planks and a battalion of Acro props then formed a temporary support for everything until the concrete floor above was poured and set.

Next, reinforced steel cages were made and laid right round the perimeter walls and all supporting walls. Together with the cages on the ground floor, our house would be immensely strong and rigid and would definitely conform to earthquake regulations.

Then we were ready for the concrete cavalry again! Four mixers arrived in relay to pour concrete over the blocks. The team then raked and smoothed the concrete, simultaneously creating a solid ceiling for the ground floor and a level and smooth base for the first floor.

All this work took three weeks and on my birthday at the end of March, Richard and I celebrated sitting on two chairs with a glass of Prosecco, overlooking the sunny valley from first floor level!

One extra bit of excitement was the transformation of the exterior of the boiler room annex. One fine day we arrived to find one of our team building the external skin of stones and bricks, which instantly added character. It was precise work, with each stone and brick being hand-picked for its shape and colour blend with its neighbour. Now this annex no longer looked like a modern build, but suddenly appeared old and mature. It was incredible and immediately gave us a good impression of what the final house might look like.

It was by now the end of March and the next phase would see the roof being built and the building made watertight. If the rains arrived in late April we wouldn't mind! ■

Photograph © iStock

ABRUZZO

PROPERTY FOCUS

From the ski resorts of its western mountains to the **long, sandy beaches** of its northern coast, Abruzzo has everything, yet property prices are on your side…

€250,000-€500,000

CASA TROIANO

This characterful stone property is private and secluded, yet within walking distance of the medieval town of Bisenti. The property is split into 2 apartments, with external staircase, but you could install an internal staircase. Ground floor: entrance hall, kitchen, lounge (40sqm), 2 bedrooms, bathroom. First floor: kitchen, lounge, 3 bedrooms, bathroom, terrace (50sqm) with mountain views. The ground floor is used as a holiday rental apartment, and is finished to a high standard, all renovated. The property has beautiful vaulted ceilings downstairs; upstairs, it is a more modern style and is quite open plan. It has about 1 hectare of mostly flat land.
Price **€295,000** *Contact* ☎ **+39 349 275 3034**
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€100,000-€250,000

CASA ANATRA

Location: Castilenti, Teramo. Charming stone-built detached house, totally restored, with many original features. The ground floor is open-plan with all stone walls. Through the main door, the kitchen expands into the dining area; this leads into the living room area; through a stone arch you enter a seating area overlooking the pool terrace. The stone walls are complemented by separate stone staircases to each of the two bedrooms. The master bedroom has a balcony overlooking the pool and a large terrace. The guest bedroom looks out to vineyards and olive groves. Under the terrace, there is a separate apartment, 50sqm.
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CASA DELLE MONACHE

Location: Montefino, Teramo. Traditional farmhouse built over a spring on a south-facing hillside, with the special feature of 2 natural fountains and its very own stalactites! Lovingly restored and furnished to a high standard. Ground floor: Fully equipped kitchen with wood-burning stove, sitting room, lounge/dining room and bathroom. First floor: 2 large bedrooms and a bathroom. Basement: Natural spring and 2 storage rooms. A shaded lounge overlooks the pool and there is a covered alfresco dining area. The land measures 2 hectares, consisting mostly of olive groves, with many fruit trees. Lovely views of mountain ranges and a medieval village.
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€100,000-€250,000

MONTEBELLO

This 240sqm 4-bedroom detached villa of recent construction sits close to Montebello, some 39km from Pescara and the sea. Lower ground floor: a taverna developed as an open-plan living room with fireplace and kitchen/dining area, as is typical in the Abruzzo countryside; bedroom with bathroom; terrace shaded by the balcony above. Upper ground floor: Two ensuite bedrooms; balcony. Loft: Some 35sqm for a further bedroom and bathroom. 1,500sqm of laid out garden with terrace, pool with hydromassage bath, and ample parking. Currently used to offer B&B, ideal to continue in the same vein or use as a private dwelling for anyone who would love to be close to the National Park of the Gran Sasso.
Price **€195,000** *Contact* ☎ **01322 660 988 www.casatravella.com**

€250,000-€500,000

COLONELLA VILLA

5-bedroom villa of recent construction, just 1km from the village of Colonella, about 5km from the sea at Martinsicuro and less than 1 hour from Pescara airport, with magnificent views, one way to the sea and the other to the mountains. About 300sqm over two floors, which can be used as separate apartments as they are connected both internally and externally by stairs. Lower level: entrance hall; open plan living room with French doors and kitchen area; study; bathroom and extremely large bedroom. Upper level: Entrance onto open-plan living room of about 50sqm with corner kitchen; storage room; 3 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms; large covered terrace. Private garden with fruit trees.
Price **€370,000** *Contact* ☎ **01322 660 988 www.casatravella.com**

€250,000-€500,000

COLONNELLA APARTMENT

This spacious property is located just 2kms from the sea and provides a beautiful sea view in a newly-built, small residential complex. The property is around 140sqm in size and comes complete with its very own private garden. Within are 3 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms, and a living room with open plan kitchen area. The finishing is of the very highest quality, and includes air conditioning, satellite TV, beautiful parquet flooring and parking. The *comune* of Colonnella is in the Province of Teramo, just over the border from southern Le Marche, so you have the choice of flying to either Ancona or Pescara airports, both being no more than one hour's drive away.
Price **€260,000** *Contact* ☎ **01322 660 988 www.casatravella.com**

Gearing Up

With this year's round-Italy cycling race about to get under way, **Fleur Kinson** is feeling the excitement. She tells us why the Giro d'Italia is more fun than the Tour de France...

Photography © Gruber Images

The first thing you hear is the helicopter – a throbbing, deep-throated portent that suddenly ups the adrenalin of the waiting crowd. Everyone leans out from the pavement, straining their eyes to peer further down the ribbon of empty asphalt. Children are hoisted onto shoulders, cameras jostled into position. Then you hear a distant cheer, as the furthest end of the crowd glimpses them coming, and like a flame advancing along a detonator fuse the cheer ripples through the line of spectators towards you. You see them! There they are! A brightly-coloured knot of helmets and handlebars, pumping thighs and shining Lycra. The faces are gasping but grinning, boosted by the wild excitement of the crowd. And then in a rush of air they pass you, going faster than you imagined they would be, a lurid blur of spokes, pedals, sunglasses and… breathtaking cool. And suddenly you want to *be* one of them, to be that fit and travel that fast and have thousands of people line the streets to scream encouragement at you. And before you've even finished having that thought most of them have passed and are vanishing into the distance, whizzing on, on, on towards the next town and the next.

When the Giro d'Italia passes through, the thrill is tremendous. So imagine what it's like being at the actual start or finish of one of the individual races. Or, most exciting of all, when your city hosts the '*Grande Partenza*' – the opening of the entire three-week event. Then the atmosphere is nothing short of a carnival, with wild, celebratory hoopla going on for days beforehand. Last year, when the Giro started in Belfast, local farmers even dyed the sheep in their fields bright pink – the official colour of the Giro ever since the pink-paged sports newspaper *La Gazzetta dello Sport* spawned the race back in 1909.

Hang on a minute, I hear you saying. Back up! Belfast? As in Northern Ireland? That Belfast? But what… how…? Yes, like the Tour de France, the Giro d'Italia no longer always starts – or finishes – in Italy. Adjacent nations began occasionally enjoying a piece of the action from the mid-1960s, and ➤

Left: Unlike the Tour de France, the man in the yellow jersey isn't winning; that man would be wearing a pink jersey. Below: The pink theme comes from the race's relationship with* La Gazzetta dello Sport*, which is printed on pink paper

Last year, when the Giro started in Belfast, local farmers dyed their sheep bright pink – the official colour of the Giro since its inauguration in 1909

THE 2015 GIRO D'ITALIA

This year's Giro runs from 9th-31st May, with only two rest days for competitors. These are the stages:

- 09/5 – 17.6km, San Lorenzo al Mare to San Remo
- 10/5 – 173km, Albenga to Genova
- 11/5 – 136km, Rapallo to Sestri Levante
- 12/5 – 150km, Chiavari to La Spezia
- 13/5 – 152km, La Spezia to Abetone
- 14/5 – 181km, Montecatini Terme to Castiglione della Pescaia
- 15/5 – 263km, Grosseto to Fiuggi
- 16/5 – 188km, Fiuggi to Campitello Matese
- 17/5 – 212km, Benevento to San Giorgio del Sannio
- 18/5 – Rest day
- 19/5 – 195km, Civitanova Marche to Forli
- 20/5 – 147km, Forli to Imola
- 21/5 – 190km, Imola to Vicenza
- 22/5 – 153km, Montecchio Maggiore to Lido di Jesolo
- 23/5 – 59.2km, Treviso to Valdobbiadene
- 24/5 – 165km, Marostica to Madonna di Campiglio
- 25/5 – Rest day
- 26/5 – 175km, Pinzolo to Aprica
- 27/5 – 136km, Tirano to Lugano
- 28/5 – 172km, Melide to Verbania
- 29/5 – 236km, Gravellona Toce to Cervinia
- 30/5 – 196km, Saint Vincent to Sestriere
- 31/5 – 185km, Turin to Milan

Clockwise from top left: Publicity for this year's event; the Giro is hillier than the Tour – and those hills are steeper; cycle-crazy Italian fans turn out in their thousands; style-conscious spectators warm to the race's colour theme; coasting through the Costiera Amalfitana; yet another steep climb

since then further-flung European countries have sometimes shared in the fun too – with Northern Ireland marking the first non-continental location to host a stage of the race. (Now there's talk of distant Dubai hosting a stage at some point in the coming years. *Mamma mia*!) Of course, when a stage of the race is held outside Italy, everybody wins. The event – and even the sport of cycling itself – gains a wider audience, and the host city gains considerable kudos. As you'd expect, cities vie for – and pay lavish sums for – the right to host a stage's start or finish, aware of the publicity and visitor revenue likely to follow.

But perhaps we're pedalling too quickly ahead here. There will be readers amongst you who have only a hazy idea of what the Giro actually is. A little synopsis is in order. The Giro d'Italia is one of the three 'Grand Tours' of international competitive cycling, in each of which hundreds of sinewy pedalheads race each other around a European country in annually-varying stages for three weeks every year. The venerable Tour de France was the first of these races to establish itself, back in 1903. But the Giro soon followed, in 1909, and Spain's La Vuelta arrived in 1935. Today, Italy's Giro is always the first of the three on the calendar, so its *Grande Partenza* doesn't just mark the start of the race itself but of the whole cycle-racing season.

As you'd expect, each of the three grand tours inspires a lot of national pride. And if, as a spectator, you're not from one of the three countries concerned but you're a bit in love with one of them (as you and I, dear reader, probably both are with Italy, aren't we?), then you're likely to have more affection for one race than another – rationally or otherwise. Certainly the Tour de France has many ardent devotees across the world, being the most high-profile of the three races. But, for competitors and spectators alike, the Giro has several features that arguably give it the edge over its Gallic rival.

For a start, the Giro's routes are usually more mixed and more challenging than those of the Tour de France. Due to the nature of French geography, the early stages of the Tour often take in long stretches of flat terrain, while the Giro almost never does so. Italy doesn't have great swathes of level land like *la belle France*, and it's never long before those bike boys are huffing and puffing up huge hills then whizzing down the other side. Put simply, the terrain of the Giro is more mixed right from the start, and this makes for a more interesting race throughout. What's more, when the Giro hits the mountains, the climbs are steeper. There are some gradients in excess of 17 per cent and 18 per cent on certain Giro routes, while the Tour only ever gets up to about 10 or 14 per cent. Then there are the aerial views to be had of all this. Yes, France is a profoundly beautiful country, but Italy? Come on. Television helicopter shots of Italy's otherworldly Dolomites

Helicopter shots of Italy's otherworldly Dolomites or its candy-coloured villas perched on sea-plunging cliffs can often put even France to shame

or its candy-coloured villas perched on sea-plunging cliffs can often put even France to shame.

There's the greater intimacy of the Italian race, too. This is a smaller and rather less corporate affair than the Tour de France, with sponsors and advertisers much more likely to be indigenous Italian companies instead of multinational behemoths such as those that plaster their names across the Tour. Meanwhile, the cheering multitude of roadside onlookers to the Giro is likely to contain proportionally more Italians than there are French people watching an average stage of the Tour. Part of this is down to the huge international following that the Tour attracts, of course, but another is simply the greater passion which the average Italian has for the sport of cycling. Essentially, Italy is just a tad more bike-crazy than France, and this gives the Giro a contagious, community-wide enthusiasm.

Evidence of Italy's admiration for cycling can be witnessed any day of the year, not just during the Giro. In a nation of car drivers not especially noted for their prudence or restraint, have you ever noticed with what lavish care and attention the average Italian motorist overtakes a cyclist? Speed is dramatically dropped, an excessively wide berth is given. The respect is obvious and indisputable. Even British drivers are nowhere near as considerate to cyclists. Most Italian adults have raced bikes at some point in their childhood, and memories are fond. It's a big generalisation to make, but the average crowd of Giro d'Italia spectators is likely to be more emotionally affected by, and more knowledgeable about, cycling than any similarly-sized chunk of Tour de France spectators.

Okay, that's the biased part over. One would never dream of putting those last three paragraphs in a magazine about France, of course! Instead one would have to dream up some spurious reasons why the Tour de France was superior. As if! Anyway, the two races are certainly equal in other matters. The Giro is no different to the Tour de France, for example, when it comes to the byzantine complication of its various classifications, points system and how the thing is actually won. In a nutshell, there are different 'wins' available, and different overall 'winners' holding sway on different days of the race. A rider might lead in the Mountains classification, being the quickest to reach the top of significant climbs. He might lead the Points classification by amassing points, or the Young Rider classification by being the best cyclist in the race under 25. Meanwhile, a group of riders might lead in the Team classification. The most prized classification is the General, and it's the leader of this who wears the coveted *maglia rosa* or pink jersey.

But, as with most sports, you don't have to understand the rules to relish the spectacle. (How many of us thrill to see a white-clad game of cricket unfolding on an English green, but haven't the faintest idea what it means to be nineteen over six for three wickets, or whatever.) Rules, schmules. The atmosphere and excitement of the Giro d'Italia are immediately accessible to anyone. Italy does a bike race exactly the same way it does anything else – with passion, spectacle, style, exuberance and community. The most important thing, as always, is that everyone comes together and has a thoroughly wonderful time. ■

The Giro is no different to the Tour de France when it comes to the byzantine complication of its various classifications, points system and how the thing is actually won

Below left: The leader isn't obliged to wear matching pink shorts, socks, boots, helmet and gloves, nor must he have pink handlebars, but this is Italy and looks matter. Below right: Colombia's Nairo Quintana kissing the trophy he won in 2014

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THERE IS A GREAT FORTRESS on a height overlooking the Umbrian town of Spoleto. It is called the *Rocca Albornoziana*, after the man who ordered it built in 1359, Cardinal Egidio Albornoz. It was intended to symbolize and impose Papal rule over the town and the region around it. From it, a wary ruler could survey the town; but the fortress also looks across the deep valley of the Tessino River toward Monteluco, Spoleto's "holy mountain". There, on slopes thickly forested with oaks, are cool springs; and small streams course among the trees. The Romans, who established the town, called Monteluco a grove sacred to Jupiter, and later, in medieval times, Christian communities of monks and hermits were established there.

Between the fortress and the holy mountain, the valley is spanned by a magnificent structure, both bridge and aqueduct, impressive as the fortress, and much more beautiful. It's a bit mysterious, too. You might think the Ancient Romans built it – after all, they were aqueduct-building wizards. Many people over the years thought so: 18th-century Grand Tourists visited it, eager to see a work of the Ancients; in 1786, the great German

The Ponte delle Torri

Between a fortress and a holy mountain, the Tessino River valley is spanned by a magnificent structure, both bridge and aqueduct

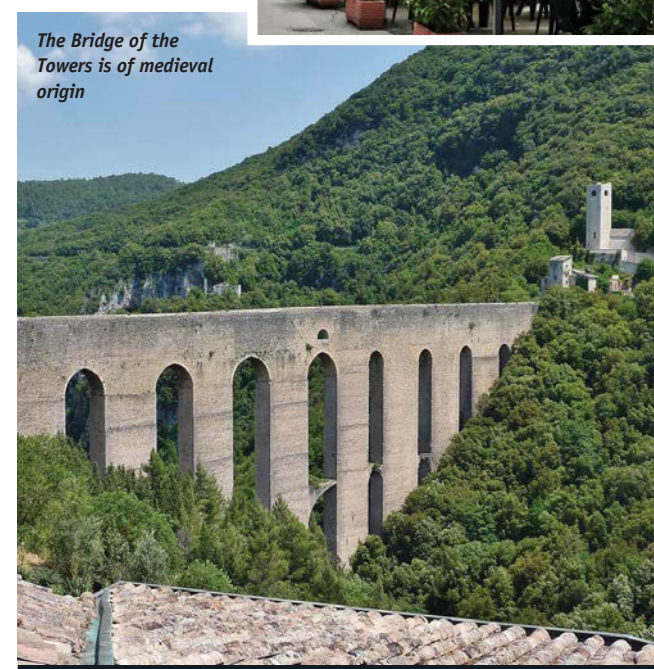
poet Goethe admired the "noble spirit" of this "work of antiquity". The artist J.M.W. Turner painted it in 1840. Perhaps he was undecided; he showed the bridge enveloped in mist.

Unlike the Grand Tourists, we have access to many images of Roman aqueducts, and this bridge is… *different*. For one thing, it is tremendously tall. At its highest point it is approximately 250 feet above the river. Of course, the Romans built aqueducts of great height, too, but usually with much shorter arches in two or more courses. The colossal piers of this bridge, and the ten graceful, narrow, pointed arches that separate them, rise dizzyingly from the very depths of the valley. The arches almost seem to be enormous lancet windows, like those in Gothic cathedrals.

Some say the bridge was built in the late 13th century on the remains of an older, ruined Roman aqueduct. Others assert that Gattapone, Cardinal Albornoz's architect, built it to provide water for the fortress. But, mysteriously, while records of the Rocca's construction survive, none do for the bridge; and it seems unlikely that Cardinal Albornoz would forget to mark the bridge with his insignia.

But the bridge *is* indisputably there, graceful and solid, intact despite earthquakes and the ravages of time. You can walk across it from the town, and explore the shaded pathways in Jupiter's grove. Or, on a balmy day, a pleasant café beside the valley invites you to have an alfresco lunch or drink, and contemplate another mystery: why is it called the Bridge of the Towers? After the stubby towers of the *Rocca*? Or the lonely watchtower of the *Fortilizio dei Mulini* across the valley? Perhaps the bridge builders, whoever they were, thought their soaring piers and arches were towers enough. ■

A nearby terrace invites you for an aperitif



The Bridge of the Towers is of medieval origin

ABOUT THE WRITER
JOE GARTMAN is a freelance writer based in Utah. A passionate amateur of art and history, and an avid traveller, he spends much time in Italy.

Photograph © Pat Gartman

IL BUSTO DI LENIN

It is now May and this is probably the last image of snow you will see in *Italia!* until the end of the calendar year. How long it will be before you see **Vladimir Lenin** again is anyone's guess…

Statues of Comrade Lenin, Father of the Soviet Union, are, in Western Europe at least, rather rare. There used to be one on public display in London but it got vandalised and is now kept in a museum. It's nowhere near as big as this one anyway. This one was manufactured in Lugansk, Ukraine, in 1922, for the good comrades of Cavriago (near Bologna) where, after a Leftist surge in the local Socialist government, Lenin had just been made "Honorary First Citizen". Then the Fascists came, the statue was taken down and wasn't seen again until it turned up in Tuscany after the war, whereupon it was 'politely' left at the USSR Embassy in Rome (much as one might an unwanted bastard infant on the steps to the house of its father). The Soviets weren't having that: they knew that Bologna and its environs were renowned as a hotbed of socialism in the West – the 'Red City' was their foothold in Italy – so they cleverly, and very patiently, waited until 1970, the centenary of Lenin's birth, to 'generously' donate the statue back to the municipality of Cavriago. It would have been churlish to refuse… And so the bust stands again in the Piazza di Lenin, where it bears testimony to the "strong civil and political passions of those years". Strong indeed those passions were; and today, every January, the local Communists still come out for a quiet vigil, even if it is snowing. !

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4 takes on SARDINES

Sardines are sustainable, easy to catch, easy to prepare, good for you, and quite delicious. Here are **four recipe ideas** that go beyond the usual tomato sauce or new potato accompaniments…

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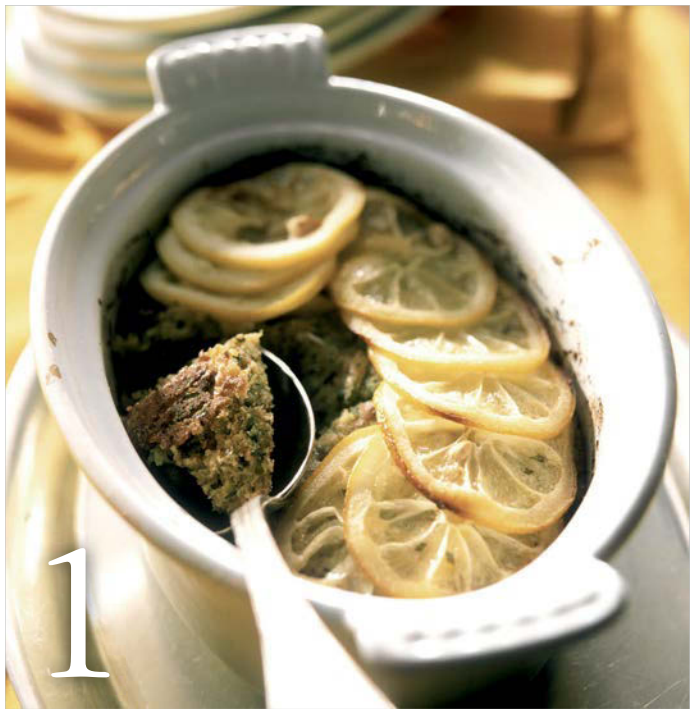


Sardine cake
Torta di sarde

***SERVES** 8*
➤ ***Preparation** 20 minutes*
➤ ***Cooking** 40 minutes*

1kg sardines, scales removed
3 garlic cloves, peeled, finely chopped
1 large bunch flat-leaf parsley, leaves chopped
4 anchovy fillets in oil
80g breadcrumbs
2 tbsp freshly grated pecorino or Parmesan cheese
2 free-range eggs
salt and freshly ground black pepper
2 unwaxed lemons
2 tbsp olive oil

Wash the sardines and cut off the heads. Cut the fish open down the length of the belly, open out the two sides and take out the backbones. Wash the fish under running water and dry thoroughly. Chop very finely with a large, heavy knife, then mash with a fork.

Preheat the oven to 180°C/Gas Mark 4. Mix the sardines with the garlic, parsley, anchovies, breadcrumbs, cheese and eggs, and season with salt and pepper.

Lightly oil an ovenproof dish, at least 2cm deep, and turn the mixture into it. Slice the lemons thinly and lay on top of the sardine mixture. Sprinkle with the remaining oil. Bake the cake in the preheated oven for 35-40 minutes. Leave to cool before serving.

Pasta with sardines
Pasta con le sarde

***SERVES** 4*
➤ ***Preparation** 20 minutes*
➤ ***Cooking** 15 minutes*

600g sardines, backbone and scales removed
2 fennel bulbs, trimmed, thinly sliced lengthways
salt and freshly ground black pepper
40g raisins
2 tbsp chopped dill tips
6 anchovy fillets in oil
2 garlic cloves, peeled, crushed
1 tsp fennel seeds, crushed
½ tsp grated lemon zest
6 tbsp olive oil
1 small onion, peeled, finely chopped
40g pine nuts
1 pinch saffron threads
400g spaghetti

Divide the sardines into two fillets. Blanch the fennel in boiling, salted water for 1 minute, refresh in cold water and drain, retaining the cooking water. Take a cup of the cooking water and soak the raisins in it.

Mash the anchovy fillets, then mix with the garlic, dill, zest and 3 tbsp olive oil. Season. Boil the pasta in salted water until al dente.

Meanwhile heat the remaining oil in a frying pan and sweat the onion until translucent. Add the sardines and sauté over a medium heat.

Add the fennel, the raisins with the soaking liquid, anchovy paste and pine nuts. Dissolve the saffron in a little water and mix in. Season and cook gently for 4-5 minutes. Drain the pasta, mix with the sauce and serve.

Marinated sardines in olive oil and parsley

Sarde marinate in olio e prezzemolo

***SERVES** 4*
➤ ***Preparation** 10-15 minutes plus 5 hours marinating*
➤ ***Cooking** 10 minutes*

the juice of 1 lemon, plus another lemon to garnish
2-3 garlic cloves, peeled, crushed
salt and freshly ground black pepper
150ml olive oil
16 sardines, back bone and scales removed
4 tbsp plain flour
2-3 tbsp balsamic vinegar
250ml dry white wine
2 tbsp chopped flat-leaf parsley
2 onions, peeled

To remove the sardines' scales, rub your fingers along the scales under cold running water. Don't worry about removing all of the bones before cooking; this will prove too fiddly. You can either eat them, as they disintegrate slightly when cooked – chew properly – or pick them out as you eat.

Mix the lemon juice, garlic, salt and pepper with half the olive oil. Pour over the sardines and leave to marinate in the fridge for at least 5 hours.

Remove the sardines from the marinade, pat dry, coat in flour and fry in the rest of the oil until golden brown. Finely dice the onions.

Add the vinegar, wine, onions and the marinade to the pan juices, bring to the boil and pour over the sardines.

Serve garnished with parsley and the remaining lemon cut into wedges.

Oven-baked sardines

Sarde al forno

***SERVES** 4*
➤ ***Preparation** 30 minutes*
➤ ***Cooking** 20 minutes*

400g small courgettes, trimmed, sliced 5mm thick
salt and freshly ground black pepper
700g sardines, scales removed
2 anchovy fillets in oil
4 sun-dried tomatoes in oil
4 garlic cloves, peeled, crushed
100g pecorino cheese, grated
1 tbsp capers
2 sprigs oregano, leaves picked and chopped
1 bunch basil, leaves picked and chopped
30g blanched almonds
1-2 tsp lemon juice
4 tbsp olive oil

Preheat the oven to 200°C/Gas Mark 6.

Brush a baking dish with a little oil, line with the sliced courgettes and season with salt and pepper.

Cut the heads off the sardines, cut open the length of the belly and remove the backbones. Wash, pat dry, season with pepper and lay on top of the courgettes.

Drain and finely chop the anchovy fillets and sun-dried tomatoes. Purée the almonds coarsely with the pecorino, capers, garlic, oil and lemon juice. Mix in the tomatoes, anchovies and chopped herbs.

Spread evenly over the sardines and bake in the oven for about 20-30 minutes.

Recipes for Spring

This is the season when the first of the year's main harvests start to appear. Here are four dishes chosen specifically to **celebrate the season**'s produce.

Pasta with ricotta and lemon zest

Pasta con ricotta e limone

➤ ***SERVES 6*** ➤ ***PREPARATION*** *10 minutes* ➤ ***COOKING*** *10 minutes*

A very quick and deliciously fresh-tasting recipe. You can vary the flavours slightly by using mint or parsley instead of basil.

350g fresh ricotta
the grated zest of 1½ large lemons
a large handful of fresh basil leaves
4 tbsp freshly grated Parmesan cheese
450g short pasta, such as conchiglie, penne or fusilli
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
to garnish
fresh basil leaves
grated lemon zest
freshly grated Parmesan cheese
extra-virgin olive oil

First, put the ricotta, lemon zest, basil and Parmesan cheese into a food processor. Whiz for about 2 minutes or until all the ingredients have blended thoroughly.

Heat a large pan of salted water for the pasta. As soon as the water comes to a rolling boil, take 2-3 tablespoons and add it to the cheese mixture to loosen the texture and make the sauce really smooth. Season the sauce and set aside.

Toss the pasta into the pan of boiling water and stir thoroughly. Remove and drain as soon as it is tender.

Return the pasta to the hot pan, pour over the ricotta sauce and toss everything together very thoroughly.

Serve at once in a warmed dish, garnished with fresh basil and grated lemon zest and with extra Parmesan cheese and olive oil offered separately.

Tuna stemperata

Tonno alla stemperata

➤ ***SERVES*** *4* ➤ ***PREPARATION*** *20 minutes plus 30 minutes marinating* ➤ ***COOKING*** *10 minutes*

This wonderful dish brings together so many of the typical flavours of one of my favourite regions of Italy. Springtime is the best time to visit Sicily, when everything still looks green and fresh, not yet burned by the heat of the summer sun.

4 thick tuna steaks

juice and grated zest of 1 orange (a blood orange if possible)

the juice and grated zest of 1 lemon

4 garlic cloves, peeled, minced finely

4 celery sticks, chopped finely with a heavy knife

4 tbsp stoned green olives

4 tbsp sultanas, soaked in hot water for 10 minutes, drained

2 tbsp capers

sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

1 heaped tbsp mint leaves, chopped finely

Put the tuna steaks in a bowl with the juice and zest of both the orange and the lemon and leave to stand for about 30 minutes, longer if possible. Then drain the tuna steaks from their marinade (reserve the marinade) and light the grill to a medium, even heat. Grill the tuna until browned and cooked through.

Meanwhile, put the olive and the garlic into a small saucepan and fry the garlic gently with the celery until golden brown. Add the olives, capers and sultanas, and cook over a low heat (or on the outer edge of the barbecue) for 2 or 3 minutes. Add the reserved juice from the marinade and cook over a high heat (move it to the middle of the barbecue) for 2-3 minutes to reduce by about half, season, add the mint and stir. Arrange the tuna on a platter, pour over the reduced marinade and serve at once.

Risotto with lamb ragù

Risotto al ragù d'agnello

➤ ***SERVES*** *4* ➤ ***PREPARATION*** *15 minutes* ➤ ***COOKING*** *3 hours*

While May in southern Italy might be fine for al fresco eating, in the north – and here in the UK – it can still be cold at times. A heart-warming risotto made with spring lamb ragù is just the answer.

1 onion, peeled, very finely chopped

2 cloves garlic, peeled, chopped

2 tbsp chopped flat-leaf parsley

1 very thick slice prosciutto crudo, cubed finely

4 tbsp olive oil

500g lamb neck fillet, cubed

1 large glass red wine

300ml passata

a handful of mixed chopped herbs, washed and dried

75g unsalted butter

400g risotto rice

1.5 litres (approximately) best-quality chicken or meat stock, or very strong flavoured vegetable stock, kept hot

sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

8 tbsp freshly grated pecorino cheese

Fry half the onion, garlic, parsley and prosciutto together in the olive oil until the onion is transparent. Add the meat and brown all over. Pour in the wine and stir. Allow the alcohol to boil off for a few minutes, then pour in the passata and stir thoroughly. Lower the heat to a gentle simmer. Leave to simmer for about 2-3 hours, or until the meat is falling apart, stirring frequently. Finish off with a handful of fresh chopped herbs.

In a separate pan, fry the remaining half an onion in half the butter for about 10 minutes over a very low heat, or until soft but not coloured. Stir in the rice and toast the grains thoroughly on all sides for about 5 minutes, so that they become opaque and coated in the butter. Add the first 3 ladles full of hot stock and stir.

When the rice has absorbed most of the liquid, add the lamb ragù. Stir through the rice. Then continue adding the stock, 1 ladleful at a time, letting the rice absorb the liquid at its own pace, stirring constantly. You will know when to add more stock as a clear wake will be opened through the grains behind the spoon as you draw it through the cooking risotto.

When the rice is almost completely soft and creamy, remove from the heat, stir in the last of the butter, cheese, and cover. Rest for about 4 or 5 minutes, then transfer to a serving dish to serve. Offer extra freshly grated pecorino cheese at the table.

Artichokes with Parmesan cheese and butter

Carciofi alla parmigiana

➤ **SERVES** 4 ➤ **PREPARATION** 20 minutes ➤ **COOKING** 10-30 minutes

Springtime in the Roman countryside means great bunches of leafy artichokes being sold at the roadside by local farmers. There is something unique about their flavour, almost metallic, but if you love them, you really love them. Cleaning and preparing artichokes is a bind, so much so that it's worth asking your stallholder to do the job for you!

4 large fresh globe artichokes

1 lemon

2-3 garlic cloves, peeled and chopped finely

3 tbsp freshly chopped mint

6 tbsp freshly grated Parmesan cheese

fine sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

80g unsalted butter

First of all, prepare the artichokes. Cut off the stem and pare away all the outer skin until very pale green, almost whitish.

Cut into thin slices and sprinkle with a little lemon juice to prevent it blackening.

Now ruthlessly rip off all the outer leaves of the globe itself until you are left with a central core of tender leaves, very pale coloured at the bottom and dark green at the tip. Remove the hard tips of the leaves and rub all over with the lemon. Open out the artichoke enough to scrape away the furry choke from the centre.

Mix together the sliced stems, garlic, mint, cheese and seasoning. Use this mixture to fill the cavity of the artichokes. Put the artichokes, top-side up, into a saucepan small enough for them to fit snugly. Put a knob of butter in the pan and divide the rest of the butter between the artichokes, pushing it into the centre on top of the garlic and mint. Pour in a little cold water, enough to come about 2cm up the sides of the pan. Cover the pan tightly and place over a medium heat. Depending upon how large or how fresh the artichokes are, it will take as little as 10-12 minutes or up to 30 to cook them until tender. Baste them occasionally as they cook. Serve hot or at room temperature.

Pronto!

When you're hungry after a hard day's work and the kids are snapping at your heels wanting to be fed, you'll want quick-and-easy meals with that all-important Italian twist. *Italia!* presents five of our favourites…

Courgette fritters with radicchio

Fritelle di zucchini con radicchio

This is wonderfully tasty way to eat up all those courgettes!

- ***SERVES*** *2*
- ***PREPARATION*** *10 minutes*
- ***COOKING*** *10-15 minutes*

280g courgettes, topped and tailed
100g mozzarella
1 free-range egg, beaten
45g plain flour
1 large handful of mint, finely chopped
the zest of 1 lemon, finely chopped
2-3 tbsp of olive oil
salt and freshly ground black pepper
lemon wedges (optional)

FOR THE SALAD

1 head of radicchio di Treviso
½ large fennel bulb
2 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
2 tsp lemon juice
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

Grate the courgettes coarsely, then lay out over double-layered kitchen roll, dabbing with more kitchen roll to remove the moisture. Once as dry as can be, add to a large bowl. Chop the mozzarella nd add to the courgette along with the zest, mint and seasoning. Add the flour and mix. Add the beaten egg and mix. Using your hands, form six fritters, pressing them between your palms. Set aside.

Wash and finely slice the radicchio head widthways. Remove the tough parts of the fennel bulb. Very finely slice the fennel and combine with the radicchio. Toss with the dressing.

Put a large frying pan onto a medium heat, and add 1 tbsp of the olive oil to the pan. Add the first three fritters to the pan allowing them to brown. They'll need about 3-4 minutes on each side.

Stuffed red peppers

Peperoni ripieni di carne

You can stuff peppers with anything you like, but they do go well with beef.

- ***SERVES*** *2*
- ***PREPARATION*** *10 minutes*
- ***COOKING*** *50 minutes*

2 large red peppers
200g lean minced beef
1 small onion, peeled, finely chopped
2 garlic cloves, peeled, finely chopped
150ml beef stock
65ml dry white wine
20g plain flour
a handful of flat-leaf parsley, chopped
a pinch of ground cinnamon
1 tbsp tomato purée
2 tbsp olive oil
2 tbsp breadcrumbs
3 tbsp grated Parmesan cheese

Preheat the oven to 190°C/Gas Mark 5. Halve the red peppers, removing the core and seeds. Drizzle with 1 tbsp of olive oil and place on a baking tray in the oven, skin-side down for 30 minutes.

While the peppers are roasting, heat the remaining oil and brown the mince in a large pan on a medium heat, breaking it up as it browns (around 2 minutes). Add the onions and garlic and fry for 2 minutes, stirring continuously. Stir in the flour, and cook until brown, then add the stock and wine, along with the salt, pepper, parsley, cinnamon and tomato. Bring to the boil, then lower the heat to simmer for 20 minutes.

Next spoon the meaty sauce into the pepper halves. (Save any extra sauce for a tasty pasta topping.) Top with the breadcrumbs and Parmesan and place in the oven for 15 minutes. Serve with plain rice, salad or fresh tagliatelle.

Lemon and garlic roasted poussins with crushed new potatoes

Polpastrello all'aglio e limone con patate

Chicken marries well with lemon and, served with new potatoes, it makes for the perfect springtime lunch.

- ***SERVES*** *2*
- ***PREPARATION*** *5 minutes*
- ***COOKING*** *45 minutes*

2 poussins

12 baby new potatoes, scrubbed

1 tbsp olive oil

1 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil

sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

5 garlic cloves, peeled

1 lemon, cut in half

Preheat the oven to 220°C/Gas Mark 7. Place the poussins side by side in a baking dish and add the garlic cloves to the dish, tucking one in each of the birds' cavities. Squeeze the juice from the lemon halves over the birds, rubbing the top of each with the flesh. Drizzle the olive oil over the birds and season generously. Cook for 45 minutes.

Around 15 minutes before the birds are ready, cook the potatoes in a pan of boiling water for 15 minutes, or until tender. Drain, place in a bowl, drizzle with the extra-virgin olive oil and crush with the back of a fork roughly. Season. Serve each poussin with the crushed potatoes and the juices drizzled over the top.

Aubergine rolls with ricotta

Involtini di melanzane e ricotta

Aubergine carries other flavours, and this ricotta combination shows the cheese off at its best.

- ***SERVES*** *2*
- ***PREPARATION*** *10 minutes*
- ***COOKING*** *15 minutes*

1 large aubergine, leafy top trimmed off

6 slices bresaola

125g ricotta

a small handful of fresh mint

1 small jar good-quality tomato sauce (around 200ml)

salt and freshly ground black pepper

1½ tbsp extra-virgin olive oil

1½ tbsp pine nuts, toasted

Preheat your grill. Slice the aubergines lengthways, getting around six slices, just over 5mm in width, from it to make the rolls. Brush the slices with the olive oil and place under the grill. They will take about 15 minutes to go soft and brown, turn them over halfway through the cooking time.

Finely chop the fresh mint and beat into the ricotta with salt and pepper. Once the aubergines are browned, allow to cool for 5-10 minutes. Set the tomato sauce over a gentle heat.

Take one slice of bresaola, fold it in half and lay on one of the aubergine slices. Spread a heaped tablespoon of ricotta over the bresaola and the inside of the aubergine. From the thinner end, roll the aubergine slice up. (Hold in place with a cocktail stick if desired, but they should hold on their own.) Repeat with the other aubergine slices.

Arrange three on each plate, spoon the tomato sauce over the top, and sprinkle with the pine nuts. Great with a side bowl of Umbrian lentils.

Farro salad with butternut

Insalata di farro con zucca

Farro is coming back into fashion (the Ancient Romans loved it!). Here we are combining it with squash.

- ***SERVES*** *2*
- ***PREPARATION*** *5 minutes*
- ***COOKING*** *30 minutes*

400g peeled butternut squash or pumpkin

150g semi-pearled farro, rinsed, use pearl barley if you can't find farro

30g rocket

30g raisins, soaked for 10 minutes in warm water

a handful parsley leaves, chopped, for the dressing

3 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil

1 tbsp red-wine vinegar

1 tbsp acacia honey

Preheat the oven to 200°C/Gas Mark 6. Prepare the butternut squash by cutting it into small dice about 2cm in size. Toss the pieces in 2 tbsp of oil and place on a baking tray in the hot oven. Turn the squash half way through the cooking time. After around 30 minutes the butternut should be ready.

Meanwhile, cook the farro in plenty of boiling water for about 20 minutes, making sure that it retains its bite. Drain thoroughly, and set aside to cool in a sieve or colander.

Mix the dressing in a bowl and add the chopped parsley, raisins and the rocket. Stir the farro into the bowl, mixing it all together well. Top with the butternut squash and serve in bowls.

GRISSINI

Something to nibble on prior to a full-blown meal is a must, and what better to enjoy as your pre-starter fancy than an **authentic Italian breadstick**? *Italia!* opens up seven packets for some savoury indulgence…

Should you have been reading this magazine for a long time, and we're talking around ten years, then you may have read a feature by then – and now – editor Paul Pettengale about how he got into a taxi one day in Turin and was, well, compelled (shall we say) to go on a tour of the taxi driver's brother's breadstick factory. You literally could not make it up. Grissini, you see, are taken very seriously in Turin. Together with chocolate (sorry Perugia, but the best of the dark stuff we've experienced was in the old capital of the country), it's *grissini* that Turin is famous for, and for which its population is justifiably proud (including its taxi drivers, and their brothers).

In this issue of *Italia!* we find out what grissini we can get our hands on a little closer to home. You can buy very high quality Italian breadsticks from local delis, dedicated stores and supermarkets. Here's where…

CARLUCCIO'S SANDOLIVA GRISSINI WITH OLIVE OIL

From **Carluccio's stores**
Price **£2.25 for 130g**

These – extremely reasonably well-priced! – grissini from Carluccio's are every bit what you'd expect them to be. Made with olive oil they're rich in taste and yet have the perfect 'snap' and a perfect crunch in the mouth. They don't taste too yeasty, but have enough power to pronounce them authentic, unlike many of the so-called Italian breadsticks you'll encounter in the supermarket. They taste wonderful on their own, although also work well when used for dipping. Try slow-roasting an aubergine, scooping out the insides, and blending (using a hand blender) with fresh garlic , salt, pepper and olive oil. Alternatively enjoy with chilli oil or home-made guacamole, if you have a palate for a hot tastes! Some of the best grissini we've come across in the UK.

VERDICT ★★★★★

Great tasting, crunch and with a supreme texture, these are some of the very best grissini we've encountered. Great price, too!

1

2

1 TORINESI CLASSIC BREADSTICKS

From **Waitrose**
www.waitrose.com
Price **£1.09 for 120g**

Sometimes the simple things in life are, well, just better. These breadsticks (available from a variety of outlets, not just Waitrose) are made with 9 per cent olive oil and taste really good, despite being machine-made and of uniform shape and size! That said they're of the 'mini' style of grissini, so thin and crisp. Narrower than a pencil they make for lighter eating, especially if you're on the approach to a large meal.

VERDICT ★★★★

A thin, mini-style of grissini, which are not hand-made – that would take absolutely ages – but are as close as dammit to it.

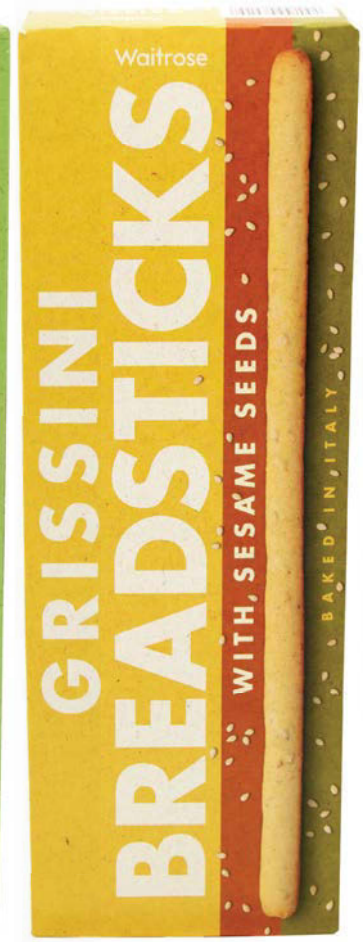
CARLUCCIO'S STUZZICHINI CORN GRISSINI

From **Carluccio's**
www.carluccios.com
Price **£2.25 for 150g**

Made with a combination of traditional olive oil and corn oil, these stuzzichini are a slightly healthier alternative to traditional breadsticks, though with their crisp texture, their semolina flour coating and their delightful, yeasty flavour these are right up there in terms of taste and quality. And for just £2.25 they represent fantastic value for money. A great choice if you're watching your weight.

VERDICT ★★★★

A slightly healthier alternative to traditional breadsticks, these are both tasty and have a delightful level of 'crunch'.



3 JAMIE'S ITALIAN DELI MARIO FONGO "IL PANATE" GRISSINI

From **Jamie's Italian delis across the UK**
Price **£6.50 for 400g**

These are, quite simply, fantastic. Please don't let the photograph put you off (our fault – they toppled over and broke during the photography session); these are some of the tastiest breadsticks we're ever tasted. They have a home-made, yeasty kick and an incredible level of crunch. Once the bag was opened we just had to carry on indulging.

VERDICT ★★★★★

Among the best, with a great flavour and plenty of moreish crunch, though we have to admit they're not exactly what you could call cheap.

4 TESCO ORIGINAL ITALIAN BREADSTICKS

From **Tesco**
Price **69p for 125g**

Stepping down somewhat from the heady price heights of the superb grissini from Jamie's Italian, we arrive back to Earth with these breadsticks from Tesco. 69p a box is a bargain, but what can you expect for your money? They're better than most supermarket fare but – as you'd expect – can not compete with the more expensive offerings on these pages. They have a lovely 'snap' to them, but are a little dry and bland.

VERDICT ★★

Cheap, for sure, though these aren't the best-tasting breadsticks on offer. Simple, honest fare, though very much machine manufactured.

5 WAITROSE GRISSINI BREADSTICKS WITH SESAME SEEDS

From **Waitrose**
www.waitrose.com
Price **95p for 125g**

Traditional breadsticks are unadorned, save, perhaps, for some semolina or chickpea flour. These ones from Waitrose carry the added kick of sesame, being liberally dotted with sesame seeds. Unlike the high-end grissini from the specialist shops such as Carluccio's or Jamie's deli, these are obviously mass-manufactured, but nonetheless have a great flavour.

VERDICT ★★★★

Not to everyone's taste but the addition of sesame seeds certainly adds flavour. Best used with a selection of dips rather than on their own.

6 KALLO TORINESI ORIGINAL BREADSTICKS

From **Waitrose**
www.waitrose.com
Price **99p for 125g**

Though we very much acknowledge the Torino heritage of grissini, we love the fact that the recipe suggestion on the back of the box recommends using them as a 'spoon' for peanut butter. However, these are tasty (slightly yeasty, nicely balanced) and crisp. These are at the higher end of supermarket breadsticks, though still not a patch on the ones hand-made for the delis.

VERDICT ★★★

Not sure about the suggestion we try them with peanut butter, though we do like the idea of dipping them in melted chocolate.

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THIS MONTH'S EXPERTS

KEVIN GIBNEY has lived and worked in Italy for over a decade and is Managing Director at his Italian estate agency with top-to-bottom experience in finding, buying, selling and restoring properties. His clients value his reality-based approach to property in Le Marche and beyond. ☎ +39 347 538 6668 www.propertyforsalemarche.com

LAURA PROTTI is dual qualified as an Italian *avvocato* and English solicitor. She has extensive experience in Italian property law, international private law, contract law, succession law, and taxation, and has assisted with the drafting and updating of books and articles on Italian Law. www.leplaw.co.uk

MAXIMILLIAN SMITH is Marketing Manager at De'Longhi UK and has a wealth of knowledge about coffee. De'Longhi make some of the best coffee machines on the market today – to see the full range of options for home coffee machines see their website at www.seriousaboutcoffee.com

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Our experts are here to help with all your questions about Italy. Email your questions to **italia@anthem-publishing.com**, or write to us at our usual address, as given on page 18.

DOWNSIZING IN TUSCANY

***Q** I have a house in Tuscany that has grown in value significantly since I bought it in the 1970s. I am now approaching retirement and would like to release some of that equity, though I don't want give up a bolt hole in Italy altogether. I'm considering a property in Le Marche, though am yet to visit the region. Can you give a brief low-down on the best places to buy property there? I'm looking to protect value going forwards, but want somewhere close to the sea and within a wine-making zone.*

Mary Jones, *Andover*

A First, the reader has a knack for getting into Italian regions just as they're poised for growth and property value appreciation! Her consideration of Le Marche is both timely and well-advised. Le Marche continues to grow in recognition and attractiveness. A recent *Forbes magazine* article cited 20 top places to live well in retirement, naming Italy as one of them, an mentioning Le Marche by name. A recent OECD survey ranked Le Marche near the top of Italian regions for Healthcare, Safety and Environment. And, in December, an annual survey of Italy's Top 100 Provinces for Quality of Life named the Marche province of Macerata #13, three places ahead of Florence! So, that might be the best place for the reader to concentrate her search. The province of Macerata offers lots of coastline, mountains, easy access, wine, food, historic sites, great outdoor sports and lots more. Many towns in the province have excellent properties available which are equidistant from coastal and mountain attractions. The reader can opt to live very close to the coast or 20-30 minutes inland, thereby opening up a wide range of properties from which to choose.

Kevin Gibney, *Property For Sale Marche*

Macerata has been voted one of the best places in Italy to live

ITALIA! legal expert

INHERITANCE TAX

Q ***My father is Italian, and my mother English. My father has been diagnosed with a terminal illness and has been given less than two years to live. They jointly own a property in Italy, though currently live in the UK, using the Italian house as a holiday home. What legal issues exist regarding transferring the house in Italy into my mother's name? What are the inheritance tax implications? And is it possible to simply transfer the ownership into mine and my brother's names in order to avoid Italian inheritance tax altogether?***
Sally White, *via email*

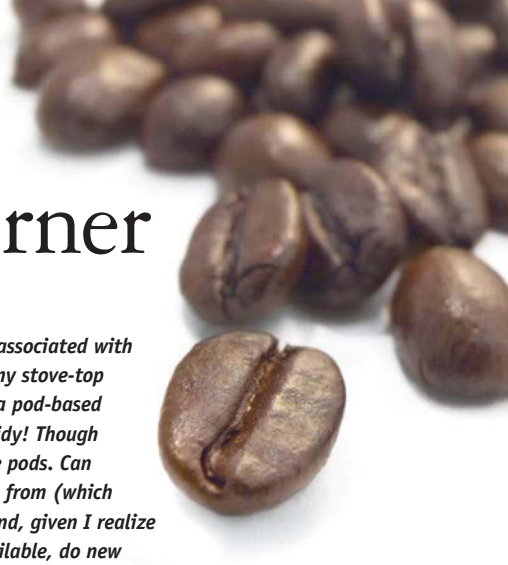
A Your father's share could be transferred to your mother on his death provided that he has made arrangements for this in his Will. Specific rules apply in Italy that give the closest relatives (spouses, children, and parents, when the deceased did not leave children or a spouse) the right to inherit a share of the estate and it is therefore essential that the Will is properly drafted to minimise the risks of conflicts between the Italian and English succession laws. If your father's estate is subject to UK inheritance tax, this arrangement would be more advantageous in terms of UK inheritance tax liabilities as the transfer of the estate to your mother (if they are married at the time of his death) would be tax free. Upon the second death the threshold or nil-rate band is £650,000. The Italian inheritance tax rate is 4 per cent of the value of the share for the spouse, ascendants, and descendants up to the fourth degree; there is an individual threshold of €1,000,000.

Should the Estate be subject to UK Inheritance tax, the beneficiaries would be able to offset what they have paid in Italy against what is due to be paid in the UK on the basis of the double taxation treaty between the UK and Italy. Specific rules and requirements apply, depending on the individual circumstances of the testator and the beneficiaries and it is therefore essential that your father takes independent professional advice before drafting his Will.

It is possible to transfer the ownership of the property into yours and your brother's names to avoid the need to go through lengthy and sometimes complicated succession formalities and the application of Italian and UK inheritance tax. However, the property can only be transferred if it is sold to you and your brother or gifted to you by your father. Again, depending on your individual circumstances, the choice between a sale or a gift should be carefully evaluated. Your father should take independent professional advice on the tax and legal implications of these options before making a final decision on how to dispose of his Italian estate.
Laura Protti, *LEP Law*

Laura Protti is the founder of LEP Law. She is dual-qualified as an Italian *avvocato* and English solicitor, and specialises in assisting British and Italian clients with matters relating to Italian law. Visit her website at **www.leplaw.co.uk** for more.

LAW LeP



Coffee Corner

POD-BASED MACHINES

Q ***I'm getting fed up with the mess associated with making by morning coffee using my stove-top espresso pot. So I'm considering buying a pod-based machine to keep my kitchen clean and tidy! Though I'm worried about the availability of the pods. Can you please tell me where I can buy them from (which supermarkets and stores stock them)? And, given I realize there is quite a broad range of pods available, do new machines come with a 'sample pack' of different pods so I can choose which ones I would enjoy on an on-going basis?***
Jessica Burgess, *Oxford*

A Thank you for your question Jessica. You might be surprised to know that there are many types of coffee machines available which remove the "mess and fuss" element of using ground coffee:

Bean to Cup: This type of machine is mess and fuss free as it automatically grinds fresh beans and froths fresh milk for the perfect tasting coffee – all at the touch of a button. Some De'Longhi models come with an integrated milk carafe which fits to the machine. This carafe froths and heats fresh milk directly to your cup for silky-smooth lattes and frothy cappuccinos, so you don't need to worry about frothing milk either. What's more, there is a built-in cleaning function. What's important is you can choose from a world of coffee beans and not be tied into a specific capsule solution. Since the machine does all the grinding and brewing internally, you only need to empty the waste grounds container occasionally.

Pod and Capsule: De'Longhi's Lattissima Nespresso range of capsule machines offer the convenience of a capsule pod coffee system as well as an integrated milk carafe which fits to the machine. It uses only fresh milk, so you're guaranteed a fresh taste and a great tasting coffee. There are over 20 varieties of Nespresso coffee capsules to choose from and they are available from Nespresso boutiques or the Nespresso online store. There are compatible capsules available in supermarkets now, but these won't give you the same high quality standards of Nespresso coffee. What's more the aluminium Nespresso capsules can be recycled and a sample pack is provided with every machine.

De'Longhi's Dolce Gusto range of pod machines offer convenience of a capsule and a multi-beverage system, which includes your coffee shop favourites as well as other drinks like Chai tea latte and Choccocino. You can find these pods in most supermarkets or from the Dolce Gusto website. Both coffee and milk pods come in non-recyclable, plastic-packed and sealed pods, and a sample pack of drinks comes with every machine.

Traditional Pump Espresso: This type of machine uses fresh ground coffee and allows you to froth fresh milk for the perfect taste – just like a barista. What's more is that De'Longhi Traditional machines are also compatible with Easy Serving Espresso (ESE) pods. You can find these at your local supermarket and these are individually packed for freshness. Coffee is pre-ground, dosed, and tamped in a small hessian pod which holds the ground coffee in place and makes for easy disposal. It's also compost-friendly.

To find your ideal machine visit **www.seriousaboutcoffee.com** or download the free De'Longhi Coffee Expert app for Apple and Android mobile phones.

DēLonghi

Maximillian Smith, *De'Longhi*
www.seriousaboutcoffee.com

BARBERA

It may be overshadowed by its local rivals, Barolo and Barbaresco, but Barbera is a Piedmontese favourite. **Paul Pettengale** explains why...

Think Piedmont, and its wine, and odds are you'll be thinking of one name: Barolo. Or maybe two, if you know your stuff (and being an *Italia!* reader you probably do!), adding Barbaresco. Both are brilliant, both unique, both the embodiment of the region. But the Nebbiolo grape variety is hard to grow. It likes steep hills, warm summers and clay-rich soil. And so yields are low and, as a result, its wine is rather expensive. However, Piedmont offers up a couple of red wine alternatives to those heavyweights of the wine world. There's Dolcetto (the 'little sweet one'), although it's rare in the UK and the US, and then there's Barbera.

If you want top-drawer Barbera wines, you're going to have to dig fairly deep

Harking from the areas around the towns of Alba and – most commonly – Asti, Barbera wines can offer levels of complexity and sophistication comparable to its Nebbiolo-based cousins, but at a price point that is significantly more wallet-friendly. (Though if you want top-drawer Barbera wines – as with anything grown on a vine stem in Piedmont – then you're going to have to dig fairly deep.)

We sampled seven examples of Barberas that won't break the bank, but can't exactly be considered everyday tipples either. Then we popped down to our local convenience store to see what that had to offer...

BARBERA D'ASTI 'FIULOT' 2013, PRUNOTTO

From **Berkmann Wine Cellars**
www.berkmann.co.uk
Price **£24.00 (typical)**

Barbera wines from the Asti region tend to be somewhat lighter and softer than those from the vineyards surrounding the town of Alba. This wine, whilst not exactly bucking that trend, has a weight and gravitas to it that is not typical. It has controlled power, demonstrating sour cherry fruit with a hint of raspberry. It has enticing aromas of damson and clove, and the finish is extraordinarily long for a wine from the Asti zone. A great choice with lamb.

GREAT WITH...

We enjoyed this with lamb burgers, though it would work well with roasts.

BARBERA D'ASTI 'DA SUL' 2013, LAIOLO REGININ

From **Berry Bros & Rudd**
www.bbr.com
Price **£15.95**

This wine started out as a labour of love, being hand crafted by Paolo – a wine maker who went it alone (Da Sul translates as 'alone') to create a stunning wine that really is a bargain, even at just over £15 a bottle. It has ripe red fruit on the nose, with a little smokiness, but it's when you take your first sip that you become beguiled. The sour cherry flavour really is remarkable; not too harsh; never tannic; but bewitching in a way that will have you on the phone for more.

GREAT WITH...

Spiced meats – curry, even – though best with lamb or beef dishes.

BARBERA D'ALBA DOC 2012, CASCINA FONTANA

From **Berry Bros & Rudd**
www.bbr.com
Price **£18.75**

Blended from grapes produced by two nearby villages – Castiglione Falletto and Sinio – this wine benefits from a silkiness to its texture and a freshness of fruit: everything a Barbera wine should be. It's not overly-complex or over-bearing, but it is rich on the nose and rewarding in the mouth, with a penetrating, long finish. That freshness of flavour will work well with many a meat dish, though this wine is also brilliant with hard cheeses and tomato-based pastas.

GREAT WITH...

A cheese lover's delight, though good with meaty pasta dishes, too.

BARBERA D'ALBA DOC 2012, GD VAJRA

From **Liberty Wine Cellars**
www.libertywine.co.uk
Price **£21.99**

First impressions count for a lot, and when you hold a glass of this to your nose and take in a deep breath, then prepare to be astonished... Tobacco, hay, cherry fruit, chocolate, even vintage leather, hit the nostrils. Wonderful stuff. Old vines are utilised to make a wine of real class; this is a top-notch Barbera that will delight anyone who sups it and complement just about every red-meat dish going. See below for our particular favourite...

GREAT WITH...

Pan-seared duck breast served pink, with roasted potatoes and French beans.

BARBERA D'ASTI 2012, BRUNO ROCCA

From **Liberty Wine Cellars**
www.libertywine.com
Price **£23.99**

We would, usually, have guessed that a Barbera d'Alba would have been won the Discovery of the Month award. There are less of them around, and therefore more to discover (if you see what we mean). But no! The accolade this issue goes to this wine from the Asti province that is quite simply beyond astounding. Fresh yet powerful, complex and mystifying, it sets a new benchmark for Barbera d'Asti. Not cheap, for sure, but absolutely worth it.

GREAT WITH...

Fillet steak – or T-bone if you can find it these days – served rare, of course.

BARBERA D'ALBA DOC 2013, CONTERNO FANTINO

From **Great Western Wine**
www.greatwesternwine.co.uk
Price **£18.25**

The wines from the zone around the town of Alba – one of the bedrocks of Piedmontese culinary tradition – are generally more powerful and feistier than their Asti-bred brethren. This one, from Great Western Wine, is no exception. It packs a punch, for sure, but one that's controlled and delicately employed. Forest fruits, together with cherry flavours abound. It has hints of vanilla on the nose, but it's as dry as a bone.

GREAT WITH...

Get the stew pot out! Throw in some chuck steak for three hours!

BARBERA D'ASTI 2013, DE FORVILLE

From **Majestic Wines**
www.majestic.co.uk
Price **£13.99**

This is a mid-priced (well, among its company) wine, and it holds its own extremely well. It may lack the character and class of some of its peers on these pages, but this wine from Majestic can hold its head up high nonetheless. Cherry, raspberry and wild strawberry aromas compliment the slightly (though not overly) tart taste. This wine is very drinkable – hard to put down, harder still to resist re-filling the glass. As good on its own as it is with food, this is an absolutely solid contender.

GREAT WITH...

After dinner conversation, or, if still peckish, a plate of fine cheeses.

AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT...

Upwards of £20 for a bottle of wine is a lot of money. Though that's where we were at when selecting this month's Barberas. The alternatives? Well, check out this £6.50 bargain from the Cooperative. It's fresh, lively, and not a patch on the other wines featured here. But in terms of value for money this is one of the best tipples we've come across. Packing ample cherry fruit and bags of 'zing' this is a wine that could – and should – give Barbera a name.

One of the best tipples we've come across

NEXT MONTH IN

ITALIA!

LIVING ON THE LAKES

Peaceful and calming, a life on the Italian lakes is the envy of all. In the next issue of Italia! we explore your property options

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Exploring a different side to romantic Venice

48 HOURS IN PADUA

Spend a weekend in the city on the River Bacchiglione

DISCOVER COLLI ESINI

Off the beaten track in Le Marche

PLUS **Food and drink galore! Recipes for early summer, more meals in minutes, the best dried pasta, our pick of Italian rosé wines, properties to buy in Tuscany and much, much more!**

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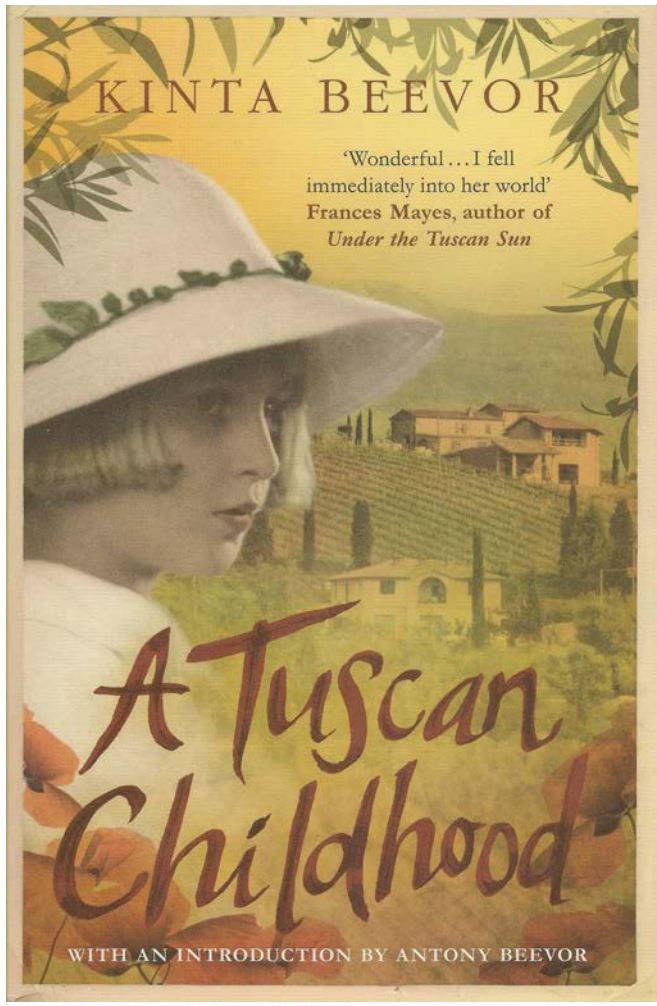
DON'T MISS ITALIA! ISSUE 127 ON SALE 14 MAY

IN PRINT

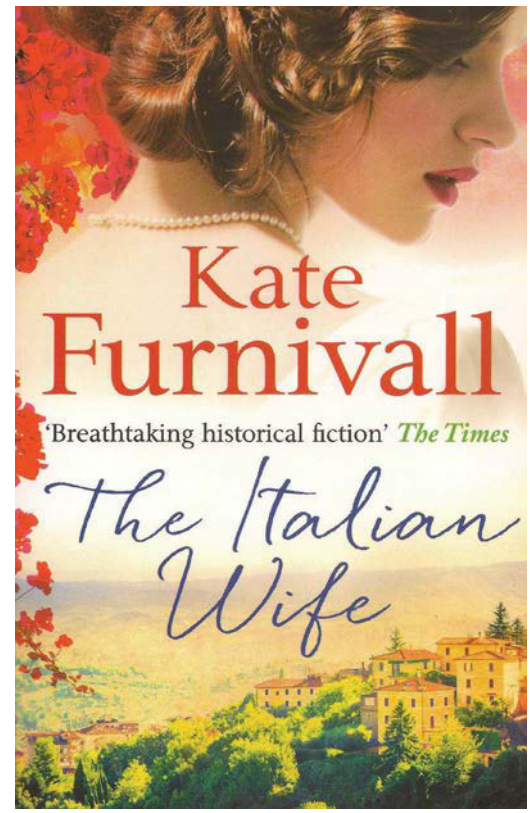
There is a distinct **war-based theme** to the books we're reviewing this month, with two novels based around WWII and the rise of Mussolini and a memoir from the mother of one of the world's most famous historians...



◄ A TUSCAN CHILDHOOD

Kinta Beevor, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £8.99 (paperback)

Childhoods are often viewed through rose-tinted glasses. Though in the case of Kinta Beevor – mother of the famed historian and author Antony Beevor, who provides the introduction to this book – there's certainly a case for reminiscence. Brought up in her parents' *castello* in Tuscany, she spent her early life running barefoot through fields, hunting for mushrooms with her friend Fiore and enjoying a freedom that was rare then (she was born in 1911), let alone now. *A Tuscan Childhood* is a remarkable and engaging tale of a young girl wrestling with the reality of a father at war and a mother coping with the stresses of bringing up children, abroad, alone.



▲ THE ITALIAN WIFE

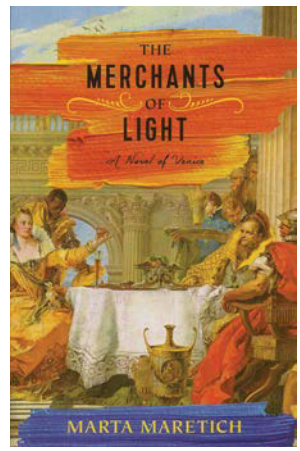
Kate Furnivall, Little Brown, £7.99 (paperback)

The latest novel from author Kate Furnivall is set against the backdrop of Mussolini's rise to power in 1932; a pre-World War II period when much of Europe was beginning to slip into chaos. The beginning of the book is powerful: architect Isabella Berotti – chief protagonist – is asked by the mother of a young girl to look after her child for a moment... The mother then commits suicide in a very public manner. It's a novel that draws on self-doubt, hidden-away childhood memories and deep, previously-unknown secrets. It's not short at just under 400 pages, but has a fantastic pace to it.

THE MERCHANTS OF LIGHT

Marta Maretich, Nine Elm Books, £9.99 (paperback)

If you've seen and enjoyed *The Monuments Men* (the film, 2014), then this novel will appeal. It's about a man's quest to find and protect the works of a Venetian artist during the latter stages of the Second World War. The book weaves its way though both the 18th and 20th centuries, combining family drama with individual despair. The central question: why recover art for a world that has been destroyed by war?



ITALY FLIGHT GUIDE

Let *Italia!*'s flight guide take the hard work out of **planning your trip**. Just pick your ideal destination from our handy map of Italy and locate the corresponding number from the list.

DESTINATION	ORIGIN	OPERATOR
1 **Alghero**	Dublin	Ryanair
	LDN Gatwick	Thomson
	LDN Stansted	Ryanair
	Manchester	Thomson
2 **Ancona**	LDN Stansted	Ryanair
3 **Bari**	Dublin	Ryanair
	LDN Gatwick	BA, easyJet
	LDN Stansted	Ryanair
4 **Bergamo**	Bristol	Ryanair
	Cork	Ryanair
	Dublin	Ryanair
	East Midlands	Ryanair
	Knock Ireland West	Ryanair
	LDN Stansted	Ryanair
	Manchester	Ryanair
5 **Bologna**	Bristol	Ryanair
	Dublin	Aer Lingus, Ryanair
	Edinburgh	Ryanair
	LDN Gatwick	easyJet
	LDN Heathrow	BA
	LDN Stansted	Ryanair
	Manchester	Ryanair
6 **Brindisi**	LDN Gatwick	easyJet
	LDN Stansted	Ryanair
7 **Cagliari**	LDN Gatwick	Meridiana, BA
	LDN Stansted	easyJet
8 **Catania**	Bristol	easyJet
	Birmingham	Thomson
	Dublin	Aer Lingus
	LDN Gatwick	BA, easyJet, Norwegian, Thomson
	LDN Luton	easyJet
	Manchester	easyJet, Thomson
9 **Comiso**	Dublin	Ryanair
	LDN Stansted	Ryanair
10 **Florence**	Dublin	CityJet
	LDN Gatwick	Vueling
	LDN City	BA, CityJet
11 **Genoa**	LDN Gatwick	BA
	LDN Stansted	Ryanair
12 **Lamezia**	LDN Stansted	Ryanair
13 **Milan**	Birmingham	BA, Flybe
	Bristol	BMI Regional
	Dublin	Aer Lingus, Ryanair
	Edinburgh	easyJet
	LDN City	Air France, Alitalia

DESTINATION	ORIGIN	OPERATOR
13 **Milan** (continued)	LDN Gatwick	easyJet
	LDN Heathrow	Alitalia, BA
	LDN Luton	easyJet
	Manchester	BA, Flybe
	Southampton	Flybe
14 **Naples**	Birmingham	Thomson
	Bristol	easyJet, Thomson
	Dublin	Aer Lingus
	East Midlands	Thomson
	Edinburgh	easyJet
	Glasgow	Thomson
	Leeds Bradford	Monarch
	Liverpool	easyJet
	LDN Gatwick	BA, easyJet, Meridiana, Thomson
	LDN Luton	easyJet, Monarch, Thomson
	LDN Stansted	easyJet
	Manchester	Monarch, Thomson
	Newcastle	Thomson
15 **Olbia**	Bristol	easyJet
	Leeds Bradford	Jet2
	LDN Gatwick	easyJet, Meridiana
	LDN Heathrow	BA
	LDN Luton	easyJet
16 **Palermo**	Dublin	Ryanair
	LDN Gatwick	easyJet
	LDN Stansted	Ryanair
17 **Parma**	LDN Stansted	Ryanair
18 **Perugia**	LDN Stansted	Ryanair
19 **Pescara**	LDN Stansted	Ryanair
20 **Pisa**	Belfast	Jet2
	Bristol	easyJet
	Cork	Ryanair
	Dublin	Ryanair
	East Midlands	Jet2, Ryanair
	Edinburgh	Ryanair
	Glasgow Prestwick	Ryanair
	Leeds Bradford	Jet2, Ryanair
	Liverpool	Ryanair
	LDN Gatwick	BA, easyJet
	LDN Heathrow	BA
	LDN Luton	easyJet
	LDN Stansted	Ryanair
	Manchester	Jet2, easyJet*
	Newcastle	Jet2

Every effort is made to ensure that the above **flight information** is correct, but do check specific flights before you plan your trip. Some routes may be seasonal.

DESTINATION	ORIGIN	OPERATOR
21 Rome	Belfast	Jet2
	Birmingham	Monarch
	Bristol	easyJet
	Dublin	Aer Lingus, Ryanair
	East Midlands	Ryanair
	Edinburgh	Ryanair
	Glasgow	Jet2
	Glasgow Prestwick	Ryanair
	Leeds Bradford	Jet2
	LDN City	Alitalia
	LDN Gatwick	BA,easyJet,Norwegian,Vueling
	LDN Heathrow	Alitalia, BA
	LDN Luton	easyJet, Monarch
	LDN Stansted	Ryanair
	Manchester	Jet2, Ryanair
	Newcastle	Jet2
	Shannon	British Airways
22 Trieste	LDN Stansted	Ryanair
23 Turin	Birmingham	Monarch
	Dublin	Ryanair
	LDN Gatwick	BA, easyJet
	LDN Stansted	Ryanair
	Manchester	Jet2
24 Venice/Treviso	Birmingham	Monarch
	Bristol	Ryanair
	Dublin	Aer Lingus, Ryanair
	East Midlands	Ryanair
	Edinburgh	Jet2
	Leeds Bradford	Jet2, Ryanair
	LDN City	BA
	LDN Gatwick	BA, easyJet, Monarch, Thomson
	LDN Heathrow	BA
	LDN Luton	easyJet
	LDN Southend	easyJet
	LDN Stansted	Ryanair
	Manchester	easyJet, Jet2, Monarch, Thomson
25 Verona	Belfast	Jet2
	Cambridge	Eastern Airways
	Dublin	Aer Lingus
	Edinburgh	Jet2
	Leeds Bradford	Jet2
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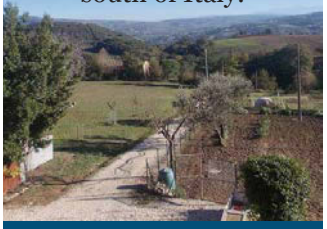

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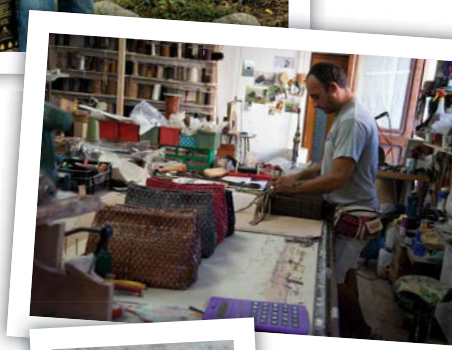
Images courtesy of Dawn Cavanagh-Hobbs

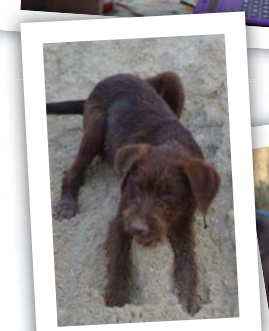
WHERE IN ITALY IS YOUR HOME?

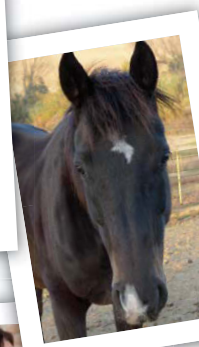
I live in Le Marche with my husband and two of my four children, experiencing things I never thought I would. I have always loved life, adventures, challenge and hard work, so moving to another country to start a new life filled me with great excitement. I look back now over the last few years and realise how lucky I am, it has been an incredible journey. Restoring dilapidated farmhouses that are often no more than a pile of rubble in the middle of a field is enough to put anyone to the test, especially if you don't speak the language and haven't got used to the opening hours of most businesses in Italy. Creating a fractional ownership business, and turning a pile of rubble into two luxury houses, with swimming pools, tennis court, vineyard, olive groves, lavender and truffle plantation in a couple of years was no easy feat.



YOU ALSO WORK IN ANIMAL WELFARE?

We have rescued five adorable puppies, abandoned at one of the properties we were restoring. We kept one, who we named Tatty, for obvious reasons, and re-homed the remaining four puppies. The following year I came across a young Anglo/Arab chestnut filly. She was living in a large herd of horses near the Sibillini mountains; she was bullied by the other horses and was not getting her fair share of hay when it was distributed each day. She was small and underweight for her age and I was worried about her state of health going into the winter, I adopted her. Her name was Nikita.





BUT NIKITA WAS NOT YOUR ONLY HORSE…

Tao, an eight-year-old thoroughbred ex-racehorse had been beaten and thrashed around the race track, injured and then left in a stable alone for almost two years. He had no contact with other horses and very little contact with humans. When I first met him he was a quivering wreck, terrified of everyone and everything that came near him. He was due to be slaughtered the next day, nobody could get near him, he was unrideable. I looked into his eyes and saw the utter despair he was feeling. I met the butcher the next day, paid him off and started on the long road of building a trusting relationship with Tao. It took me six months to form a solid partnership with him, I spoke softly, moved quietly and expecting nothing. Now he is a happy, living with the rest of the herd. I ride him regularly in a bitless bridle, schooling him, hacking out or just hanging out together. I have rescued four horses over the last few years, they have taught me so much: patience and understanding, partnership and respect.

AND THE HANDBAG BUSINESS?

A couple of years ago I met a local artisan living in the same town, Andrea. He comes from a long line of Italian leather weavers; he is the fourth generation. Over the years he has designed and made handbags for all the top Italian brands including Gucci, Prada and Bottega Veneta. I was very impressed with the quality of his work, all handmade, and his passion for the business. I had worked in the fashion industry before and loved the idea of working with such a talented artisan in our local town. I worked on some designs and colours for a new range and set up a website. I asked my son Sebastian, who had just finished a photography course in Florence, to help me with the photoshoot and Camilla, my daughter, did some modelling for us, and so Appassionata Boutique was born, a true family affair, very Italian! The handbags are selling really well and over the next few weeks we will introduce belts and wallets. Do I have any regrets about taking the path to Italy, no, my life has never been so exciting!

www.appassionata.com www.appassionataboutique.com

WHAT'S YOUR STORY?

If you want to tell the story of your relationship with Italy – whatever it is – get in touch with us! Send emails to italia@anthem-publishing.com with the subject line 'My Italia' and a brief description of your story.

Images, from top: Dawn heading hom with some olive oil; in Andrea's workshop; Tatty; Tao; an example of Andrea's work

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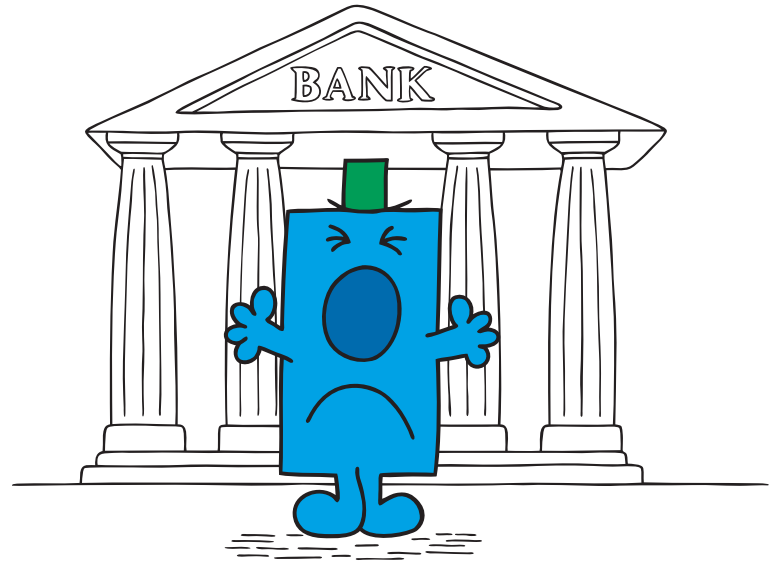
MR. GRUMPY

still uses his bank to transfer money abroad.



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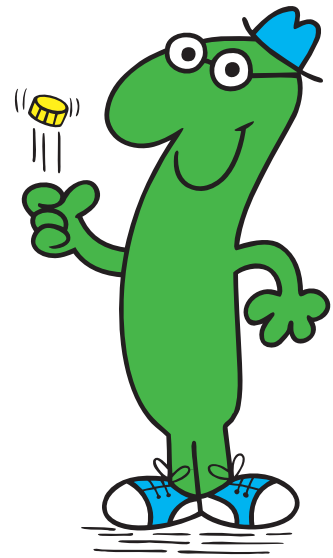

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